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THE HEAD OF MEDUSA.



THE HEAD OF MEDUSA.

BY

GEORGE FLEMING,

AUTHOR OF "A NILE NOVEL" AND "MIRAGE."

. . . doch fall ich unbesiegt, und meine Waffen
Sind nicht gebrochen; nur mein' Herze brach!

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE HEAD OF MEDUSA.

Book II.

IN DEEP WATERS—(*continued*).

CHAPTER III.

BUT that first feeling had time to pass away; she had even to a certain degree become reconciled to Borgia's presence perpetually between them, before Lalli in any way confirmed her dread of some new painful experience in store for her.

One hot morning she had left both the men busy over letters which they had received and were answering, and had carried a book and some embroidery-work to a seat a little off the road and up the hill

in front of the house. It was a bit of steep and stony bank which she had chosen. The deep intervals between the fallen rocks were filled with a tangle of blackberry vines; wild strawberry leaves stained blood-red, or yellow freckled with brown, grew closely together in all the cracks and crannies of the great gray boulders; and against the sky, crowning the ridge of the solitary rock beneath whose shadow she was sitting, a fringe of golden rod and aster stood boldly up in the sun. She had not been there for many minutes before her husband joined her. He was smoking as he came slowly up the road, with his hands in his pockets.

It was a part of Cesco Lalli's accepted philosophy that married life must sooner

or later become, as someone has said, a question of "Shall we engage a butler, or will the parlour-maid do?" But it has been found, curiously enough, that the material difficulties of life are scarcely to be simplified by the rejection of an ideal. It annoyed him unspeakably now to be forced into this practical interview with his wife. Still he spoke kindly.

"This is like old times, Barbara."

He threw away the end of his cigar, and sat down on the grass beside her. She was working. "You are always doing something," he said, bending his head to look at the embroidery.

She lifted her face suddenly, and their eyes were nearly on a level. "*Già*, you are always doing something with those pretty

white hands of yours," he repeated, smiling reassuringly.

Then, after a moment's silence: "But even to be always busy does not imply good luck. *Dì la verita* (tell the truth), it is so, is it not, Barbara?"

"Yes," said Barbara, wondering.

He glanced at her, still keeping the end of her work between his fingers. "As for me, I am sick of this life of continued annoyance (*Sono stuffo di questi inganni eterni*). I have just had another most unpleasant experience. A man to whom I had advanced money on a promissory-note—but never mind the details; you would not understand them. It is enough for you to know that I absolutely require that you should help me."

He sat up, and the bit of silk dropped from his hand. "It is your father who ought to help us now," he said, in a complaining tone.

Barbara sat perfectly still for a minute or two, keeping her eyes fixed upon the nearest rock. "Have you asked papa for money yet?" she asked in a very low voice.

"No—yes. I did not suggest it as a favour to myself. I said that you were coming to speak to him about recovering your mother's dowry. It is only just. It is what anyone else would have insisted upon long ago," said Lalli slowly.

Each sentence was spoken with increasing intensity. He expected an outbreak of

passionate remonstrance. But she only said, after an interval of silence :

“ I suppose that you have not forgotten under what conditions my father must claim the money ? And when we married you said that you would prefer not to take it. And I should like papa, to have been spared pain if possible. He——” She put her hand quickly up to her lips, which began to tremble. “ I think it hard that he should be made to suffer in consequence of—us. He was not desirous of our marriage.”

“ He was not,” Lalli assented sullenly, looking away at the blank road.

“ And—indeed, Cesco, you said you would not do it,” said Barbara, rising too

and laying her hand pleadingly upon his arm.

He moved his eyes uneasily from side to side, looking past her.

“I said it—I said it! Well, yes, I did say it. And much good it did me! As if it made any difference what a man said! I would have said anything—then.”

“Ah——,” murmured Barbara.

The very force of her scorn reacted upon her like a stimulant. She bent down and picked up the book which had fallen to the ground and brushed off some particles of moss adhering to its covers. “Shall you wish me to go to town at once? or will it do if I wait until we move to Rome

next week? I should prefer not to write to my father unless you especially desire it."

"Oh, wait till next week," said Lalli quickly. "It is really very good of you not to make more objection. But, of course, when you come to think the matter over quietly—— And you will see that, as I have already suggested to him, it is far more natural that the request should come from you. But it is quite the same thing."

"Oh—quite," said Barbara, feeling as if there was nothing left in the world worthy of an explanation. And even in this case did not she and her husband unite in the doing? How could any further action be feasible which should not express them

both? Even at that moment she felt the impossibility of disavowing his purposes to her father, for what blame was possible which should not reflect backwards? And it had been her own desire to marry him.

“Then that is all right. *Benone*,” said Cesco cheerfully, drawing himself up and spreading out his hands. The look of anxiety fell away from his face. A smile came into his eyes, he began whistling softly in an undertone.

“I see them bringing out my horse. I told Gianbattista he would find me here. I am going over to the lower farm,” he remarked presently, breaking off in the middle of his tune. He looked at his wife. “You were reading, were you not? What is it? Anything interesting?”

“Oh, it is English. You would not understand it,” said Barbara, still with the same careful precision of manner. She felt as if all impulses of relenting tenderness were crushed for ever.

“Well—good-bye for the present!” said Lalli, looking at her and then slightly shrugging his shoulders. He had meant to tell her some news he had heard about friends of her own as a sort of reward for her obedience, but now he could see no particular reason for caring to give her pleasure.

He turned away, and went whistling down the hillside, jumping from rock to rock. She heard his loud animated voice speaking to the groom and then to his horse, and presently he cantered past on the road, with his

dog circling and barking at the horse's heels. There was a tendency to massiveness in Lalli's physique which made him always appear to greatest advantage when seen in the open air and engaged in active exercise. Well mounted, one could have imagined him riding out of one of Dumas' novels. There was promise of adventure in his aspect. As he turned out of the highroad now into a leafy lane overrun with eglantine and honeysuckle in flower, he checked his horse to gather a wild rose from the hedgerow. He adjusted it carefully in the button-hole of his riding-coat. He smiled to himself as he did so, humming the while some words of an old operatic song. He had begun of late to find life interesting. He cut at all the hanging branches with the end of his whip

as he rode along. It amused him to see his horse start and swerve at the sound. The financial calculations which crossed his mind from time to time had acquired a sudden new cheerfulness. He felt almost sorry now that he had not told his wife about meeting Hardinge. After all she might have been much more disagreeable about speaking to her father—confound him! And, after all, the important point was gained when she consented to do what he chose. For, with all his own characteristic looseness of relation between statement and fact, Lalli had gradually acquired an absolute confidence in Barbara's word. And it was, he reflected, a comfortable quality to have secured—

in one's wife. On the whole, he was not particularly dissatisfied with his marriage.

Barbara had remained for some time where he left her. She had resolutely taken up her book; it was a volume of Darwin's "Origin of Species," which was comparatively new then, and which Hardinge had lent her. She had put it aside for a long time, finding it difficult reading; but now, under the stimulating rush of indignation, it was astonishing how easily her mind moved, receiving new facts with a prompt flexible intelligence, which seemed like something apart from her usual self, some separate force.

She read persistently until her watch

warned her it was nearly time for luncheon. She walked back to the house with the same feeling of defying emotion, going to her room and ringing for her maid to help her change her dress.

“But the signora contessa’s gown is still perfectly fresh. It only came from the washerwoman this morning,” the maid remarked in some astonishment. She was not accustomed to these sudden whims on the part of her mistress.

“Oh, get me something I have never worn before. Give me the new white dress,” said Barbara, sitting down before the glass and beginning to arrange her hair. She wanted everything to be different.

“*Per ubbidirla, signora,*” said Nanna, re-

flecting rapidly that it was true the Cavaliere Borgia was staying in the house, and had not Tomaso, the groom, brought back some queer stories about the way the master went on in Rome? *Madonna mia*, but it was a shame! little Nanna thought sympathetically, kneeling down to adjust the train of the new dress. And if that was the way 'Maso expected to go on after their own marriage——

“The signora should always wear white. The signora contessa looks like an angel in white. And with that pink colour on her cheeks,” she said aloud. *Dio buono!* but it was dull out there in the country! It was small wonder if the signora wanted a little amusement.

It is possible that this was also the

Cavaliere Borgia's opinion. He had asked permission after luncheon to smoke a cigarette beside her in the garden. It was a large old-fashioned garden laid out *à l'Anglaise*, with clipped yew-trees, and much gravel walk and stone seats half buried now under the untrimmed thickets of syringa. At the farther end from the house stood a group of old black cypresses. The ground was bare of everything but moss beneath their shadow. There was a bench here on which Barbara sat down; on the opposite side of the walk were two stone animals, sphinxes or lions, it was difficult to speak decisively.

Barbara sat down here.

"It is hot. When it is hot one finds it fatiguing to walk far. You are tired, con-

tessa, *non è vero?*" the Cavaliere Borgia observed.

He was in the habit of making statements of this nature. Before Lalli's marriage he had indulged in much admiration for this fair-haired girl ; he thought her " lively and full of judgment " (*vivace e piena di giudizio*), and it had struck him as unaccountable, under the circumstances, that she should fail to feel some similar attraction towards himself. Later on, he had attributed this inattention to the fact of her being in love with Cesco ; but now, and especially after seeing more of Cesco, it seemed not improbable that her mind would be more open to the claims of unobtrusive merit.

Meanwhile, he proposed to try an experi-

ment. After one or two remarks about the heat—a thunder-storm was coming up—he said suddenly: “For we Romans, of course, it makes less difference. And we count you as one of ourselves now, signora. *Una vera Romana*, you are a true Roman. But I was surprised to meet other friends of yours in town at this hot season.”

“Ah,” said Barbara listlessly, “Miss Maclean does not like the trouble of travelling. They often stay all the summer long.”

Borgia looked puzzled.

“Miss Maclean? That is the old lady with the sister? But I speak not of her. I speak of that young man—he whose friend was lame—who was a friend of your father.”

“Mr. Hardinge! Do you mean Mr. Hardinge?” she asked, with a sudden change of tone. Her eyes brightened.

“Mr. Hardinge. *Sicuro*—Mr. Hardinge. We met him at the café. He is staying at the Hotel d’Angleterre. He has been travelling. He has been staying at Sorrento with the Signora Damòn. He is at the Hotel d’Angleterre waiting for a friend to join him,” said Borgia slowly. He sat down on the bench—hitherto he had been standing—and looked steadily at her. “Is it possible that Cesco did not speak of this?” he asked.

“No,” said Barbara, the colour deepening a little on her cheeks. She added quickly: “Probably he forgot it.” Speaking the words seemed to give them reality.

Borgia shrugged his shoulders heavily. "You think that probable?" He hesitated for an instant; he looked up. Barbara's eyes were turned away from him, her hands were lightly clasped together on her lap. The sudden illumination passing away from her face marked more clearly than usual the difference which this last year had wrought in her expression. And after all Borgia was something more than merely a thick-shouldered and rather stupid young man. There were kindly instincts to be awakened in him; he was, for instance, an excellent and devoted son. He was moved now by a real impulse of compassion.

"It is—yes, *perdio!*—it is too much to ask of a man that he should stand by

calmly and see you treated in this fashion ! ”

“ Signor Borgia ? ” said Barbara, looking up with incredulous wonder. It was a new experience to her that any outsider should have presumed to make her life a subject for private speculation.

“ What does it matter ? ” asked Borgia, standing up and crossing his arms. (She had often seen Cesco assume that attitude.) “ You would not listen to me ; I know it. If I were to say to you that I care for nothing in life but being of some use to you, what would it matter ? I have always cared for you, and you knew it when you chose to marry Cesco. You must have known it. Why it was I who spoke to Cesco first about you.

I had told him all about you the day you met—at the Quirinal Ball. It was I who had followed you everywhere for weeks; who knew all your movements. Cesco had never heard about you, except from me, before that day. And then you chose *him*."

"It is not true!" said Barbara passionately, standing up and looking at him from under her eyelids with a scornful slightness, as if she could hardly admit the fact that he was indeed there.

It was enough to turn compassion into a smarting desire to make her feel his presence at any cost. Borgia's eyes sparkled. "You don't believe me then? Ask Lalli," he said with significant concision.

“Ah !” said Barbara, sitting down again and letting her hand fall heavily against the stone of the bench. She felt sick at heart.

“How was I to suppose that you did not know of it? You were easily deceived !” said Borgia, still speaking with much bitterness.

She did not move, and, after a moment’s silence, he added in a softened tone : “But I did not mean to hurt you. You have enough to trouble you without that. Only how was I to know that you still cared for him ?”

Barbara did not answer.

“I must go now, I suppose. I shall leave a note for Cesco, to say that I was called away on business. I ask you for

nothing ; but whatever happens, you know that you can depend on me—to the death,” he added. His voice trembled ; he was much moved by the sound of his own words. “Good-bye—Barbara !”

He looked at her hand, but his courage failed him. He did not dare to touch it. “I am going. ’Tis not your fault. ’Tis fatality. I am going ; good-bye !” he repeated. He added : “I shall write to you from Rome.”

“Good-bye,” she said automatically.

The very words he used—Cesco’s old phraseology—fell like a chill paralysis upon the faith she had been struggling to keep alive. At that moment the past grew empty and ironical as the placid stone visage of

some broken idol. She leaned her head back against the rough trunk of the tree behind her, feeling faint. She heard Borgia's slow heavy footsteps crunching on the gravelled walk, and she knew that he was gone; but his absence made little difference. What she had heard about Cesco had burnt out all meaning from his other words.

“Not even then—he was not loyal even then,” she said to herself over and over again. For the first time since her marriage she gave her fear an articulate utterance. And to have thrown away her life—all its possibilities—for this!

She did not weep. She sat looking with a sort of stupefied wonder at the grotesque forms of the moss-stained sphinxes across

the path. It was the first time in her existence that Barbara had known—had recognised—the inexorable clutch of experience. In all which had gone before, in her girl-visions of life, in her pleasures, in her love for Lalli even, she had been conscious of personal effort—of a willing effort—but yet conscious that she herself had somewhat to do with the result obtained. But now—she faced the inevitable. Here was knowledge of sorrow that was hereafter and always to be a part of her. It was not even a question how she might submit to it. The privation was absolute.

A few drops of rain fell slowly on her hands and on her white dress. She rose, with the feeling that it was incumbent

upon her to do nothing to provoke remark, and went back into the house. The afternoon had almost passed away as she sat meditating. It was growing dusk now inside the great hall. She passed into her boudoir. The storm was coming up rapidly; the thunder broke in a long clattering peal overhead; there was a banging of window-shutters, and a hurrying of footsteps; presently she heard her husband's step on the stair. He had ridden his horse around to the stable and come in by a back door.

“What is all this infernal nonsense of Borgia’s?—Look at my luck! look at what I have escaped, will you?” he said, coming in with his hat still on his head and an open

letter in his hand. He pointed with his whip at the blinding sheet of rain. "A deluge—and just a day before the corn wants cutting! It is the devil's own invention!—But what is all this about Borgia? What made him go? He said this morning he should stay until to-morrow."

He threw his hat down on the table and stood looking at Barbara.

"I did not ask him to go. It was his own proposition," she said after a silence.

"It is very curious then," said Lalli dryly, tapping the table with his whip and continuing to look at her. "Very curious indeed."

She rose, moved by some uncontrollable

emotion. She walked over to the window and looked out. With her eyes fixed upon the white driving sheets of rain, it seemed easier to ask certain questions.

“Cesco——”

“Well?”

“Do you remember—before we were married—you wrote me that letter—— I have always wanted to ask you about it——”

“Well?” asked Lalli again, seeing that she paused. He threw himself down on the sofa and took out a cigarette, and began feeling for his match-box.

“I wanted to ask you—about that duel with Cavaliere Borgia,” said Barbara resolutely.

The wild gust of wind and rain which beat against the window seemed to shut them in more completely alone. She crossed the room and went and stood before her husband. "About that duel. Do you remember——?"

"Oh yes, I remember," said Lalli calmly, turning his dark eyes towards her without moving.

"Tell me!" said Barbara beseechingly, kneeling down suddenly beside him and putting her hand on his arm. He contemplated her for an instant in silence. "It was—it was true, was it not?" she asked in a very low voice, laying her cheek down against his hand.

Lalli smiled imperceptibly.

"My dear Barbara, as if you needed to

be told that all is fair in love and war! And I was very much in love with you in those days, my dear." He smiled and brushed back his moustache. "I assure you I remember the morning perfectly."

"Then you did not mean it," said Barbara slowly.

She rose and seated herself by the table. She turned her face away from him and looked at the smiling portrait of the old Contessa Lalli; it was the lightest object in the room. "Then it is true—I am right in supposing—that what I imagined to be a—a crisis for you was only a farce? You wrote me that story about the duel because you knew that was the way to make me come?"

"I knew that was the way to make you

come certainly," said Lalli complacently. "But it was quite true that I had challenged Borgia on your account. Poor Borgia! I was really in the devil of a temper that day! I daresay I should have shot him if we had gone out together. I don't know," he said musingly, throwing his arm back over the head of the sofa, and knocking off the ash of his cigarette. "Perhaps we should have shaken hands over it in any case—even if you had been stony-hearted enough to resist my appeal. We have both been out often enough not to need to give a proof of courage under fire. And then, being old friends made it easier to arrange. *Fra amici*. It is possible to come to an understanding between friends."

He looked over at his wife inquiringly.

“You never asked me about this before, *cara mia*. What is the matter? What has made you so curious? Has Marcantonio been reminding you of old times?”

He stood up and rubbed his hand carelessly over his hair.

“I don’t suppose that you expect me to feel disappointed that I did not let myself be shot at *pour tes beaux yeux*, eh, Barbara?”

“I? I expect nothing,” said Barbara in her clearest voice.

At that moment she stepped aside morally, judging her husband as if he belonged to another world from her own. In the bitterness of that isolation there did not seem

to be left even so much as a memory in common. And it had always been so from the first. She had always been mistaken. There seemed nothing left in the world worthy of love ; life had grown hateful.

Once, travelling in the Italian Tyrol with her father, they had spent the greater part of a summer day driving beside the barren rock-strewn expanse which at times was the bed of a stream. She remembered the arid iron-bound look of those mountains ; in another way it seemed to her that she was seeing it all over again. And was it altogether Cescio's fault that she had never understood a southern nature ? Had he ever pretended to be otherwise than he was ? She thought of that Italian stream ; and the

full pouring surging tide of his passion—
breaking resistance and overwhelming re-
treat—where was it now? There was left
to her a bare and sun-scorched wilderness
in the extremity of summer.

CHAPTER IV.

“AN Englishman of normal health and spirits never compares himself to anyone else. At the utmost—when he is ill, or after half a lifetime of foreign travel—he compares other nations to his own,” observed Mr. Clifford Dix sententiously. “I don’t mean,” he added after a pause, “that the remark applies particularly to Lexeter.”

“No,” said Hardinge lazily, clasping both hands together under his head and staring

up at the sky; "certainly not; not to Lexeter."

"When do you expect him here?"

"Oh—any time to-morrow. I am not in a hurry. I don't mind waiting when I have everything else I want," looking away at a distant line of stone pines. What darkness against limpid light those broad-roofed pines lifted against the sky! He gazed at them for several moments in silence. "Why should one ever leave Rome? Rome in summer."

"Fever," said Dix, yawning.

"Hang the fever! You had much better make up your mind to stay. Stay and travel up to Venice with us when Lexeter is ready to go on. I think of stopping several days in Venice."

“Can’t. I have promised to meet some people in Florence; cousins of mine. One of them is very pretty—the same sort of type as little Miss Damon. By-the-way, what has become of the Damons? You saw them, didn’t you, at Sorrento?”

“They are very well. They are just as usual,” said Hardinge, smiling confidentially at his row of pines. He looked up at the sky again. “You had far better join us and throw over your cousins.”

“One of them, the elder one, has never been out of America before. She is a wonderful specimen of the New England type—one of those New England women

who lack a little wholesome sin to make them efficiently human. She is like someone whose only conception of fire is 'sitting over a hot-air register.'

"Oh," said Hardinge, "I did not understand. Of course, if you are looking forward to a new intellectual experience—— That settles it. I daresay we shall all be grateful when your next novel comes out."

"Ah," said Dix. "But speaking of new experiences, I saw that Italian fellow the other day—Lelli—Lalli; the man who married Miss Floyd. What has become of her? Nice girl that. I should like meeting her again. I fancy she was just the sort of girl who would come out tremendously strong after her marriage." He added, after

a pause: "I always fancied that Lexeter was rather hit in that quarter, do you know?"

"Lexeter!"

"Well, I don't pretend to be infallible."

"They are coming up to town this week. I met Lalli the other day at a café, and he told me so. I half offered to ride over to call on his wife, but he said they were coming up."

"That sounds promising for Lexeter," said Dix, yawning again and looking at his watch. "Odd thing, though, that it should always be one's friend's wife who teaches one to fall in love with virtue!—Nearly seven, by Jove! and there is still all that confounded pack-

ing to look after. Well—good-bye, old fellow. I shall see you again somewhere I suppose?”

“I will walk down to the gate with you,” said Hardinge, putting on his hat.

They had been lounging away the greater part of the afternoon in the Villa Albani. Hardinge's permit was for an off-day. The Villa was empty save for the presence of the custodian, his workmen, and his family. And what a place it was, and what an afternoon ! Outside these walls Rome lay like a thing dead, sunstruck and silent. But here was leafy coolness ; here were statues, busts, fountains, vases, black cypresses, motionless illex-groves, and formal walks of box, and bright parterres of flowers surrounding columned pavilions from whose walls Greek

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masks look out with tragic glare or grin in comic horror. Here are bas-reliefs by Pheidias and Polyclete; here is the famous bas-relief of Antinous holding the lotus-flower, his beautiful brows knitted with pain. But even this is not the supreme thing in the Villa Albani.

The supreme thing is the Greek marble bas-relief of Orpheus and Eurydice. Hardinge stood looking at it for a long time. He often came to see it—this simple, grave, sweet thing, witness of a lost art of naturalness, of propriety of gesture, of harmonious lines and beautifully-filled spaces; a work in which line and mass are more than detail, in which everything is just in emphasis and large in impression, and apart from imitative or realistic art.

The summer afternoon seemed made for looking at this warm-tinted, soft-textured, Pentelican marble. He found himself in a world of graceful, harmonious, and beautiful things, images from a past life and an old worship—the worship of beauty and the life of nature; a plastic world, which bears no trace of Christian, or mediæval, or modern sentiment; a summer world, fresh with the sound of water falling under leaves.

And for one moment imagine yourself in his place. Look at delightful fauns piping or dancing, at leering satyrs, at reeling Silenus; look at sleepy, languid, white-armed Bacchus; at well-knit Mercury; see the nymphs, the bacchantes, the mænades, and the marble Venus herself, and confess if

this is not to feel like an exile? to look with alien eyes upon these shapes from the old world of smiling existences—a world to admire, a world that has something in it to release one from the stress and torment of business and religion? Aliens and exiles that we are, how close can we get to Greek ideals? Baffled, as before something different to us, remote from us, we gaze and use our critical sense, employ our understanding, and do not surrender to emotion. We miss, before the very images of supremest Greek life and beauty, the blithe, free, open spirit of pure, and conscienceless, and elemental enjoyment to which they best appeal—from which they were born.

We look, as Hardinge did that night, past

statue and bust and column, past cypress-grove and avenue of ilex, to the wide campagna, now warm-coloured and glowing with ripened miles of grass and grain ; we look at Monte Generano, pale and ghost-like ; we look at the faint and waving line of the Alban hills ; we see the rising August moon in spaces of filmy cloud, the sighing pines, the masses of oleander letting fall their flakes of blossoming fire. And then, and only then, do we surrender to emotion ; sadness and charm possess us ; for nature is greater, closer, more potent than art to the modern man.

The sky grew darker ; there was a rolling mass of thunder-cloud heaped up at the horizon in the direction of Bracciano. It was the storm that we know of, breaking

among the hills. But the evening was cloudless at Rome. While Barbara was standing by the window, Hardinge was idly watching the same storm, and from a distance. His thoughts went back to Sorrento. Presently he rose and strolled down the path with his hands in his pockets. His way led him past the blossoming oleanders. The flower reminded him of Octave; the last time he had seen her she had worn one in her dress. He stood still, looking down at the soft rosy clusters; their exquisite flush of colour was like a message, a confession. He put out his hand and drew one of the branches gently towards him. He would not pluck one—no! he would not pluck one for the world. He sat down

on the edge of a marble sarcophagus and looked over at the flowers. The vision-like beauty of the evening, the perfume of the oleanders, the solitude, were all a part of an exquisite explanation. He understood now why he had returned to Italy.

CHAPTER V.

IT was not until the following week that the Lallis arrived in town. Hardinge never forgot those intervening days. He spent them chiefly alone, in cool deserted galleries, in churches, or stretched out at full length in the shade under the pines of some villa. And wherever he went he carried his new secret with him. It followed him through the empty and echoing corridors of the Vatican ; he felt it in the warm touch of

the wind, he heard it in the cool, dripping, splashing sound of the fountains. Once, in the course of that week, he wrote to Mrs. Damon, inquiring about their plans. What was their next move to be? It was quite possible that he might have the pleasure of joining them again before long. He sent no especial message to Octave. He waited—he was hardly impatient—for her mother's answer. He was existing in a charmed space of life; any action, even the most ardently desired, would be interruption.

But this feeling did not prevent his calling upon Barbara. It was the day after her arrival, and as he entered the old familiar *portone* of the Palazzo Vecchio, and ran lightly up the broad dark steps, it seemed difficult to realise much of change in her sur-

roundings. It was Margherita who opened the door to him, with a "*Bentornato, signorino!*" which made her black eyes flash again with welcome. Was the Signora Lalli at home? Ah, that she was, thanks to the blessed Madonna, and a rare sight it was to see the dear young lady in her own place again. She had nothing to say against the signor conte, not she; a handsome young gentleman, if there ever was one, and a tongue to coax the birds down off the trees when he was so minded, but—— *Via!* she was a stupid old woman; she was keeping the signorino waiting in the passage; and what with the luggage the Signor Floyd was taking with him, and the signora's own boxes not yet half unpacked——

“Is Mr. Floyd going away?” Hardinge asked with some surprise, glancing at the pile of packing-cases.

“He goes—— *Santissima vergine!* but he goes to America,” said Margherita, throwing open the drawing-room door. She looked in: “With permission. A visitor for the signora contessa!”

Barbara was seated at the writing-table near the window, her cheek resting on her hand. She looked up abruptly at the sound of Margherita’s announcement, half turning around in her chair; and then, as her eyes fell upon Hardinge, the whole expression of her countenance altered. Something like a wave of reflected sunlight passed suddenly over her face. She held out her hand: “Ah, how good of you

to come so soon. I am so glad to see you again."

"I should have come still sooner. I should have come yesterday, but I thought you would be tired. I thought you would not want me. And I fear I am interrupting you as it is," said Hardinge, shaking hands with her and glancing at the writing-table.

"How was I to know that it was you? I thought it was some tiresome caller," said Barbara playfully.

She drew away her hand and pointed to a chair. "You shall have your old seat." She sat down herself with her back to the light. "I am really so very glad to see you again," she said simply.

Hardinge looked at her. Her eyelids

were a little red as if she had been crying not long before, and the smile of pure gladness which was playing about her lips gave her something of the look of an unhappy child at school receiving an unexpected visit.

Hardinge looked at her with a sudden accession of interest. There had always lingered in his mind some touch of association, some remembrance of the walk they had taken together, which gave him a peculiar sentiment about what concerned Barbara. He was at all times especially tender and chivalrous in his thoughts about women, but in this instance the feeling was even stronger. He would have liked to take both her hands in his to try to comfort her. In default of

anything more satisfactory to say, he contented himself with asking after her husband.

“Count Lalli is very well, thank you. He will be sorry not to see you. He has gone to the bank to see about some business with my father; otherwise they would not be out in this heat.” She looked down at her hands lying on her lap. “I think, probably, he will be going to Venice before long.”

“Who will be going to Venice? Your father?”

“No. I mean Cesco.”

“Ah, I am going there myself before very long. Perhaps I may see him,” said Hardinge, moving slightly and throwing his arm over the back of the chair. He was

privately determined to do nothing of the kind.

“Why, everybody is going away. Papa is going,” said Barbara, speaking rather sadly.

“Yes; Margherita told me so. She said that Mr. Floyd was going to America. Don’t you long to go with him? I mean—you will find it rather lonely here, I am afraid. Particularly while Count Lalli is in Venice,” added Hardinge sympathetically, turning his eyes away lest it should embarrass her to feel that she was being looked at.

The colour deepened perceptibly along her cheek and throat. She turned her face aside and looked at the ray of light stealing in through the shutters.

“I suppose it will be rather lonely,” she began, and then something hot seemed to gather in her eyes and blind her. She could only sit quite still, hoping that Hardinge would notice nothing. Do not blame her for it; it was the first time for so many months that anyone had been solicitous for her. The words that he used were commonplace enough; but there was no mistaking the feeling of friendliness and liking which prompted them. And Barbara was being taught that value of the safe and common good of life which is the mark, perhaps the compensation, of suffering. And sorrow would be intolerable but that it brings wisdom and deepens love. She had never felt more passionately the need

of devoting her life in service to something admirable and worthy. The mood of intolerable despair of all things good which had fallen upon her after listening to Borgia's revelations in the garden was, after all, only a mood. It was impossible with a girl of Barbara's temperament that the longing, clinging desire for something to love should not in the end subdue all merely personal considerations. Lalli was not what she had imagined him to be. He had never been what she imagined him to be; the knowledge was a part of her daily being, but surely that made only one more reason for striving ardently to fill up all the blank between them with more and more of self-devoting

faith? But it was a relief to see someone with whom no effort was needed. She looked at Hardinge with a sense of absolute confidence.

“You will forgive my being so—so stupid. But things have gone wrong. I am troubled about papa’s going. And things have a way of being troublesome at times,” she said, with a half smile.

“I know,” said Hardinge quietly. It was impossible to say more than he expressed by the tone of that simple assurance.

He got up from his chair and wandered restlessly about the room, fingering Mr. Floyd’s old china and stuff.

“How are you off for new books?” he

asked presently, stopping before the book-case.

“I have several things to lend you” —he turned and looked towards her— “things that you will find easier than Darwin.”

“Oh, I have finished that now,” said Barbara, looking up with an answering smile. There was a contagious sense of contentment about Hardinge; she felt happier than she had done for a long time.

“Lexeter is bringing me out a lot of new books from England. Curious idea, his coming down to Rome in August, is it not? But he could not get away this year at any other season.”

“I am glad he is coming. Only I wish that it was not necessary that you should go away so soon!” said Barbara, looking at him frankly.

“Oh, I am not gone yet,” said Hardinge, hastily, standing up and passing his hand over his hair. He added: “I think you must let me stay for a while and see if I can be of any use to you. Perhaps I might be of some service to look after your luggage and all that when you go to Venice to rejoin Count Lalli? And when Lexeter comes we must see if we cannot get up some more of our old riding parties. I daresay it would not be too hot after six o’clock. And there must be people left in town whom one knows.”

“Don’t try to make things too pleasant. Remember, I have been living in the country. I am not used to such dissipation,” said Barbara playfully.

“It is all the better for you then. Such very good people are all the better for being spoiled,” said Hardinge, taking up his hat to go. As he opened the door he caught sight of the packing-cases outside. “I want to see Mr. Floyd so much before he leaves. I want him to call on my mother if he stays any time in New York. I wish you would ask me to come back to dinner?” he said, laughing.

“I hear papa coming in. He shall ask you himself,” said Barbara, leaning back contentedly in her chair. It

was like a change in the weather to have Hardinge's bright presence in the house.

When he went away that evening Cesco Lalli was the first person to make any comment upon him.

"I am beginning to like young Hardinge rather. He amuses me. I used to think him conceited." He walked over to the empty fireplace. "It is a pity he is such a little fellow; he wouldn't be bad looking otherwise," he said, squaring his own broad shoulders and looking at himself complacently in the glass.

Barbara had seated herself at the writing-table.

"I am going to write to Octave Damon. Mr. Hardinge says the Damons are still

at Sorrento. I am going to ask Octave to come and stay with me for a few days, if it makes no difference to you, Cesco ?”

“What difference should it make ?” asked Cesco, shrugging his shoulders slightly.

He fixed his dark eyes meditatively upon the ground.

“Apropos, I met Borgia to-day.”

Barbara did not answer.

“I asked him to come in this evening, and he said he was engaged.”

“Well ?” said Barbara, after a pause, and without turning her head. She was contemplating a spot on the wall. “What then ?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Cesco, looking at the

back of his wife's head. She wore a large silver comb in her shining hair. "That is pretty," he said, coming up behind her chair and touching the comb with his finger. She sat quite still. Her mind was moving rapidly over the many ways in which it was possible to give him some clue to the meaning of Borgia's attitude towards her. "By-the-way, I shall want you to speak again to your father before he leaves about that money," Cesco continued, turning away and throwing himself down upon the end of the sofa. He reached over and picked up a French novel which was lying on the nearest table, opened it, ran the palm of his hand over the leaves, and let it fall

with an exclamation of perfect ennui and weariness.

Barbara took up her pen again and went on writing.

One day—it was during the first few months of their stay at the villa—she had been attracted to the window by the sound of repeated shots from a gun. Below her, in the courtyard, were Lalli and his intendant. Lalli was holding the gun. He was aiming at something fastened to a pole at the extreme end of the court; something alive, which ran from side to side, and struggled, and flapped a broken wing.

“Oh, it is nothing to make a fuss about,” he called out cheerfully, throwing back

his handsome head and turning his face up to his wife's balcony. "Come down and see it. It is only the wild hawk that was taken in the nets this morning. I have been trying the range of my new gun. Look here, that is not so bad for such small shot at that distance—eh Tista?" he said, turning to the old intendant. "Look here—and here." He picked up the dying bird by its broken wings and turned over its feathers. "You could cover the places with a sou. That's something rather different from the scattering of that blessed old gun of yours."

"But oh, Cesco, won't you kill it? Look!—oh please, won't you kill the poor thing at once," said Barbara, clasping her hands

imploringly as the bird began struggling convulsively in his clutch. "See there—oh see, it is alive still. I know it is alive."

"Alive? I should rather think it was," said Cescio with a laugh, throwing it down on the ground carelessly and turning on his heel. "It takes something to kill a hawk, eh Tista? Why that fellow has at least twenty pellets in him now."

"Twenty at least," said the old man assentingly, bending down and pushing the bird about with his foot. "Eh, signor conte, but that is one who will do no more mischief in the world."

"*Gia! è vero,*" said Cescio indifferently, taking out his handkerchief and brushing

a fleck of blood off the back of his hand.

Barbara never forgot the expression of his face at that moment. The whole scene remained photographed on her mind—the look of the courtyard, the blue of the afternoon sky, the figure of the old man moving away with bowed back across the line of sunshine, the absolute weariness and apathy with which her husband stood examining the lock of his gun while the tortured creature was slowly dying in the dust at his feet. It was not so much positive, active cruelty; it was not that he took any especial pleasure in inflicting pain, it was merely that he did not care. There was no affectation and no determination in it—he absolutely did not

care. She never forgot it, and she never referred to it in the most distant manner. The scene remained in her mind like a nucleus around which other impressions gathered. Each event was very slight in itself, but not slighter than the series of impressions and impulses which had culminated in her marriage to Lalli. It was merely the same process reversed.

When she had finished her letter, she rose from the table to fetch a photograph of herself which she wished to enclose to Octave. Cesco had fallen asleep. His head was thrown back and his lips parted; the flickering light of the candles made him look as if he were smiling, his lips seemed to move. The air of ennui which had been growing upon him of

late had quite disappeared. He was sleeping as lightly and peacefully as a tired boy. One of his arms was thrust under his head, clutching his curly hair—the other had fallen at his side, the open palm and relaxed fingers were hanging over the edge of the sofa. Barbara bent down softly and lifted this hand gently back. Some impulse made her refrain from waking him; he looked so peaceful, so kind. She blew out all the candles but one, and placed that one high up on the mantelpiece, where the light should not shine on the eyes of the sleeper. And then she drew her own chair near the open window, and leaned her cheek upon her hand and looked out.

She looked upon the same old familiar

silhouette of chimney-pots and tiled roofs. Opposite her window was the convent ; its small round belfry made a black line against the sky, and in the open spaces between the rafters she could see the outline of the bells. Beyond the convent-roof was a garden with straight, black cypresses ; beyond that another mediæval tower. It was a very hot, still night ; the air in the street felt breathless. The moon had not yet risen, but beyond the city the horizon was lighted up in places as if from the reflection of a fire. The lamps in the streets looked like fallen stars ; they did not seem to radiate light, they merely glittered. At this height there was just wind enough to fill the white muslin curtain ; it stirred backwards and forwards, brushing against

the polished floor. The only other sound was the low regular breathing of the sleeper.

It seemed such a good world just then to Barbara. All her life long she had let herself be moved by considerations, swayed by influences outside of her own personal wishes and griefs. The serene tranquillity of this limpid summer night was like the strengthening presence of a friend. There seemed reason for trying to be good in a world which was so beautiful.

The convent-bell rang out sharply. Lalli moved and muttered something in his sleep.

“Are you awake, dear?” asked Barbara softly, turning her head.

The candle flickered and smoked in the draught on the chimney-piece. Lalli did not answer, he was breathing heavily.

She changed the position of her arm, it was growing cramped with leaning on the window-sill. She sat up, looking straight out before her. Things which Hardinge had said kept coming back; once or twice she smiled; there were so many things she wanted to talk to him about, the next time she saw him—to-morrow. All the intellectual side of her nature had been appealed to, was awakened. And this had been done by a man in thinking of whom she had need of no mental reservations, no fear of coming upon dark corners and baffling walls. And she was glad of it, she told

herself, clasping her hands together, and looking up, with eyes which suddenly grew dark and moistened, at the clear starry vault of the sky. She was glad, it was good, that she should have known absolute honesty and faithfulness. It was good to be saved from doubt, not to grow hard and unloving because——

And having reached this point of enthusiasm, she pressed her hand suddenly hard against her lips and began to cry. The tears rolled slowly, one after the other, down her cheeks ; she did not brush them away.

The curtain waved regularly to and fro. She could hear the ticking of the clock in the next room, the sound of Cesco's

breathing. And she was so young—and so terribly lonely.

The feeling of pleasure, success, the thrill of gratified ambition, the large peace of noble endeavour, these may all come into loveless lives—but not satisfaction. And to have lost that—at one-and-twenty——

Cesco stirred uneasily again. He moved his hand and sighed heavily once or twice. Then his lips parted, he half opened his eyes and spoke :

“Regina!”

Barbara's heart seemed to stop beating. She sat perfectly motionless, looking at the opposite wall.

There was a moment of intense silence.

The curtain rustled and was still again. Lalli had closed his eyes instinctively, but the sound of his own voice had awakened him, and he knew that he had spoken. At the end of two or three minutes he moved; he sat up, and passed his strong hand slowly through his hair.

“By Jove, I believe I have been asleep!”

He stood up and settled the collar of his coat about his neck.

“I believe I have been asleep. I was dreaming. I was dreaming about my cousin—about Regina.”

“Cesco——,” began Barbara.

She checked herself abruptly, and her head drooped a little forward.

Her husband looked at her sideways. He took the candle from the mantel-piece. His eyelids were heavy and swollen with sleep. "I am so tired, I do not know what I am talking about. Come, Barbara, it is long past your bedtime. Your face is quite white. You will not be fit to do anything to-morrow."

He held the door open for her to pass.

He laid his hand for an instant on her shoulder as she passed by him ; their two faces were very near together, and Barbara smiled faintly, but she did not speak. How much would it be possible for her to believe of his answer ? She wanted

nothing so much as that he should not speak.

When his wife had left the room, Lalli stood quite still for some moments meditating. After a little consideration he walked over to the writing-table and sat down. He began three or four times to write a letter, but after scribbling a few lines he tore each copy into the smallest shreds. Finally, when the dawn was beginning to grow gray behind the housetops, he succeeded in completing what he had to say. After all it was not a long letter. He addressed it simply "To the Signora Cardella," without adding any number or street.

The next morning at breakfast he announced, rather suddenly, that he was going to Venice.

“I thought,” said Mr. Floyd, putting down his newspaper, and turning his unexpected glance full upon his son-in-law, “I fancied that I had understood you to say that you should remain in Rome until the end of August.”

“Oh, Barbara can stay as long as she likes; I don’t wish her to come before she is ready,” said Cesco, pushing away his coffee-cup and rising from the table. He took up his hat to go out, and added, looking at his wife: “On the whole, I think you will find staying here pleasanter. I shall have a lot

of business to look after for the first two or three weeks; perhaps I shall have to go to Turin. And here you will have Margherita and Miss Damon to take care of you. And Hardinge might bring you on to Venice when he comes."

CHAPTER VI.

IN those days it occurred to Madame Raimondi to give a picnic. "I want to see, my dear, who is left in Rome when everybody has gone out of town," she said to Barbara confidentially. "Of course you are coming, both of you——" (It was the day after Miss Damon's arrival. She was sitting in the window, sewing, in the freshest of morning gowns—all over pink frills.) "I am counting upon Octave's re-

appearance as a pleasant surprise; and oh, my dear child, cannot you bring your cousin, Count Lalli's cousin? I saw her the other day walking with your husband. There is not another such a head and throat in Rome. And what eyes! I wish I were a man; it's the only thing which ever made me wish it," said the flat-faced little Scotchwoman, poking at the rug with her parasol.

"Dear me! Do you really think she is so pretty as all that?" asked Octave placidly, putting her curly head on one side and looking critically at her work.

"Pretty? My dear Octave!"

"There can be no doubt about Regina's beauty," said Barbara in her clear, full, steady voice. Her cheeks flushed a little.

“But I think—I am not sure—but I think that the Cardellas are not in town. I went to call there the other day and the servant said that either Regina or the baby—I forgot which—was not very well; and Signor Cardella had insisted upon taking them to the country.”

“Oh, the husband is a stick. Enrico knows him” (Enrico was Signor Raimondi), the elder woman said carelessly; and then, curiosity prompting her, she added: “but I hear also that he is a stick with a meaning of his own. Quite a *bâton de chef d'orchestre*. He means to give the tone to the whole proceeding. And they say that he is frightfully jealous of his wife.”

“Oh, I hope not!” said Barbara ardently, leaning forward and clasping her hands.

“Well, well; we all hope not. It’s a cheap wish, as wishes go. And it rather gives one a reason for investigating deeper into such matters,” said Madame Raimondi with a short laugh, rising from her chair and adjusting the folds of her scarf. She put out her plump hand, and all the bangles and dangling things which she wore about her fat white wrists rattled and clashed against each other. “Well, good-bye, my dear, for the present. You are coming to my picnic, you know. And you won’t tell the count that I have been talking scandal about his cousin; talking scandal about Queen Elizabeth, eh?”

“I won’t tell him. But Cesco is in Venice,” said Barbara, rising too.

“And does that absolutely prevent your writing to him?” said Madame Raimondi, looking at her with bright eyes. “Dear me! I should never have given you credit for so much philosophy, Barbara. Why, I always imagined that devoted young creatures like yourself were in the habit of writing by every post. Well, well; I suppose a great deal must be forgiven you because you have loved much. Why it seems only the other day that all Rome was talking of your romantic love - match. You must tell me all about it some day, my dear. I have always meant to ask you more about it. You know I’ve adopted you quite as one of my own set of girls since you married an Italian. I only wish you would

get Miss Octave over there to show as much sense."

"Octave prefers making frills, thank you," said that young lady quickly. And then she added calmly, almost before their visitor was out of earshot :

"I don't know what you think about it, Barbara, but I consider that woman is growing perfectly insufferable. Her impertinence is always breaking out in new spots, like something that has begun to grow mouldy. I wonder," she said, looking meditatively at the needle she was threading, "I wonder if she wears that hideous red scarf under the delusion that it takes the colour out of her nose? And *I* should consider such a profile a judgment."

And then a minute or two later she made some excuse for leaving her place. She leaned over the back of the chair, and laid her soft cheek gently against Barbara's. Barbara put up one hand and pressed her face closer. For a moment they stood so without speaking, and then Barbara rose from her seat abruptly and walked straight out of the room.

"Poor dear Baby!" said Octave softly, looking after her. She picked up her work again and sat down on the lower step in the window-seat. A single ray of sunlight came in between the closed shutters, and turned her rough dark hair to a sort of dusky gold incubus about the little head; it shone on some large white roses on the

table, and was reflected on the polished floor. The whole room smelt of roses. A bell rang somewhere, and Margherita's voice sounded shrilly from the kitchen. It might be another visitor, Octave thought, and her heart began beating a little faster.

It was the grove of Egeria which Madame Raimondi had selected for her picnic. The carriages were to meet there at five o'clock. There was to be the boiling of a kettle under the trees—"in gipsy fashion," as Madame Raimondi herself explained to the Cavaliere Borgia, leaning on his arm, and waving her hand in the direction of the two or three servants in livery who were collecting sticks from the underbrush with much dignity of gesture.

It was a very breezy afternoon. The wind blew steadily across the open country. The large, rounded, white clouds moved rapidly along overhead from south to north; the rest of the sky was of a dark stainless blue.

Madame Raimondi had collected a large party. They sat on the ground, at the edge of the grove, about a table-cloth spread out on the grass; it was so hot that the grass broke like straw when one walked over it.

Barbara was seated beside a fat old lady whom she had never seen before, but who looked at her with interest, and asked questions about her father.

“I know Mr. Floyd; I knew him years ago, years before you were born or

thought of, my dear. And so you are Douglas Floyd's little girl; and you are married. Dear, dear, how time goes! How very romantic! I should like to have seen your father. And which is your husband, pray? Show him to me; I should like to see him. What—what did you say? You must speak clearly, my dear; this hot weather makes me a little deaf. Which of those young gentlemen is it? Not the one who is flirting so hard with that pretty girl in pink, I hope?"

"Oh dear no. That is Mr. Hardinge, a friend of ours. My husband is not here; he is in Venice."

"In Venice? How very romantic! And you are going to join him there, of course?"

But pray tell me, my dear Contessa Lalli"—she put her hand impressively upon Barbara's arm—"you said Hardinge, I think. What Hardinges are these? Is this young man one of the New York Hardinges?"

"I think Mr. Hardinge's mother lives in New York. He has just left Oxford."

"Educated at Oxford? Indeed! it sounds very romantic. I have been to Oxford myself; I took my niece there as we were passing through England. And tell me—I don't think you mentioned this young man's christian-name?"

"Walter," said Barbara; "Walter Hardinge."

She spoke very softly; she had never

called him by his name before. But evidently this old lady's hearing was capricious.

“Walter,” she repeated briskly, putting up her double eye-glass. Hardinge looked quickly across the table at the sound of his own name. “Ah, yes, I thought so. Now that he has moved I see the likeness. He must be the son of old Admiral Hardinge; his name was Walter, I remember. Dear me, Walter Hardinge's son! A very good family that, a very good family to belong to. Riches and religion—two very good things; and you can't have too much of either, as my poor dear husband used to say. And so your little friend seems to think,” she added languidly.

“My friend?” said Barbara.

“The little pink girl. She came with you, did she not? Ah, I thought so. Well, I should say, judging from appearances, you know, that she is quite well aware of what an eligible young man she is talking to. You don’t agree with me? Ah, well, I daresay you know best; we are all fallible in this world, especially in such weather.” She passed a perfumed handkerchief across her lips. “Is that my vinaigrette lying beside you? Ah, thanks; a thousand thanks. But you are looking quite pale from the heat, my dear? I am afraid the coming here has been too much for you? Really that Madame Raimondi is a most injudicious person; very well-intentioned, poor soul, but so injudicious.

And to drag us out here at this season of the year. I detest picnics of all kinds. Really I do not see how people can be so selfish."

"I hope you have everything you want, and are quite comfortable, dear Mrs. Van Ness?" asked the lady in question, bending across the table.

"Oh quite, quite. It is really quite too romantic," said Mrs. Van Ness graciously, putting up her eye-glass and smiling at the landscape.

Madame Raimondi was attired for the occasion in a short white gown with scarlet bows. The sleeves of her dress only came down to her elbows. She had wide black velvet bands about her wrists to indicate moral simplicity, and

she carried a small basket of fruit on her arm.

“My dear Barbara,” she said, “you are eating nothing—positively nothing. I shall have to write to Count Lalli myself if you do not take better care of yourself than that. Let me send you some of Cavaliere Borgia’s delicious peaches. Cavaliere, you shall have the pleasure of offering these to the Contessa Lalli in person.”

“Oh, thank you, no. Indeed, I don’t want anything,” said Barbara, rising as she saw the cavaliere approaching. Her getting up was the signal for a general movement. People had finished luncheon; they began walking about in groups and pairs; many of the younger men

lighted cigars ; there was a general intention to go down and look at the fountain.

In the confusion Barbara had moved away a few steps. Borgia accosted her. "You never answered my letter," he said reproachfully.

Barbara was silent for a moment.

"I never read it."

"Ah," said Borgia, throwing back his head and looking at her from under his eyelids. It was a familiar action of Cescò's. He turned very red, and his large hands began to tremble. "But you will excuse me if I observe—— Allow me to remark, signora contessa——"

"Are you going into the grove ? or with

the others to look at the fountain? Come and sit down in the shadow. It is cooler there, and you are looking horribly tired," said Hardinge, joining them, and speaking in English.

"Yes," said Barbara instantly, turning towards him, and laying her hand upon his proffered arm. She moved away without looking back at Borgia. But she was no longer frightened. When Hardinge had found her a place in the shadow, she seated herself and leaned back against a tree, and drew off her gloves with the feeling that this was rest.

"I saw you being devoured by a horrible old woman," said Hardinge, laughing. "Miss Damon introduced me to her after luncheon,

but I fled. She said that she was an old friend of our family. I felt like reminding her that discretion is the better part of friendship. What on earth were you talking to her about all the time those people were feeding?"

"Oh, about you. She was asking questions about you," said Barbara, colouring and reflecting quickly that if indeed things had been as—as Mrs. Van Ness hinted, he would hardly have concerned himself so much about the movements of his neighbours. It was impossible not to feel happier at the thought.

"Talking about me, was she? I fancied I heard my own name—the old wretch!" said Hardinge comfortably. He threw

back his head, and clasped his hands behind his neck, and looked up at the ilex-branches above him. "I remembered her perfectly—who she is and all that—the moment Miss Damon mentioned her name. That is the worst of Roman society; it is like a rag-bag, it includes everything that has been rejected elsewhere. I remember Mrs. Van Ness at my mother's house when I was a little chap; she used to bully us all round. She had a husband then, a very handsome man, who had been all smashed to pieces in some railway accident."

"Ah, she began telling me about that," said Barbara.

"I believe myself that it was all a

dodge on the poor man's part—an artless attempt at suicide. I should have made it a case of conscience to assist him in carrying out his views had I been present at the time,” said Hardinge, breaking out into his irrepressible boyish laugh. His face too had changed in this last year. Just now he was very much sunburnt, and it made him look older.

Presently the voices of the rest of the party were heard drawing nearer.

“They are coming up the hill,” the young man said, looking down between the black ilex-trunks. “Shall we go out and meet them?” He offered her his hand to assist her in rising. “We do not want a mob, headed by

Mrs. Van Ness, in the ‘unfooted grove of the gods.’”

For they were standing nearly in the centre of that strange circular group of ilex-trees which crowns the hill. The sunless ground, stricken with immemorial shadow, was bare of grass or flowers. The strong steady wind swept over the shuddering black branches with a sound like the moaning of an organ. These trees are never silent. There is always wind among these branches; and to stand among them is like listening to the mighty melancholy voice of the Campagna itself—the voice of one crying in the wilderness—the very voice of Rome.

As they went forward to meet the others,

Hardinge said: "I shall come to call on you to-morrow evening, if I may—and bring Lexeter. I expect him to arrive to-morrow."

CHAPTER VII.

OCTAVE was very silent during the drive home. She went early to her room, complaining of headache. She came down late to breakfast in the morning. It was a long colourless morning. Neither of the two girls felt entirely at ease, and yet each had a great desire for the society of the other. They laughed and talked much more than was their custom. Octave began describing minutely the life she expected to

lead in Paris with her mother ; Mrs. Damon was already on her way to Paris. And in the midst of her description she stopped short, and came up to Barbara and put her arms about her neck and kissed her.

“I do love you, Baby,” she said, with irrelevant fervour, blushing all over her delicate throat and cheek.

Barbara noted the blush, and her heart contracted painfully. For a minute or two she was silent, and when she did speak it was only to say : “Dear, dear little Octave !” But the tone in which she spoke made the words sound like some passionate pledge of loyalty.

After luncheon Octave went out to drive with Madame Raimondi, who was to take

her to the theatre in the evening. After leaving her at the door, Barbara had herself driven to the church of Santo Stefano. It was a place which she always associated with Hardinge. They had met there once, in the early days of their acquaintance, on one of the first occasions that Lalli had singled her out from the others and drawn her apart. There seemed to be a sort of fitness in going there now; it was like revisiting a turning-point in their lives. As she was driven over the narrow stony byways she was living over again, with an ardent mournfulness, all the hours which she had ever spent with Hardinge. She could see quite clearly how that first feeling of liking and con-

fidence had deepened and strengthened with time and knowledge until now it seemed the only unchecked part of her soul. All the rest was under restraint; silenced because no room had been made for it. She thought of their parting, perhaps for ever, in a few more days; and the knowledge that he would never certainly know how much his presence had signified in her life, counted for nothing in that moment of discovery. All that she asked for was to keep an untroubled undimmed impression of him before her eyes. Failure in life is to have no ideal. She felt that Hardinge had saved her from that experience.

But she had not reckoned upon the effect which the sight of that familiar

place would have upon her. She got out of her carriage and walked to the door, past the narrow beds of carnations in bloom. The door was locked. It was late in the season for strangers. The old custodian looked at her curiously; he fumbled at the key with trembling twisted fingers. "It is the fever," he said, shaking his head dolefully; "the fever, the fever, the fever."

Barbara went in alone. There was a worn stone step at the entrance; she remembered stumbling over it once before, and Lalli's outstretched hand. The church was cold; it struck one with a chill on entering. All the light came from above; it fell on cold circular walls, on pictures of forgotten martyrdoms. It was like

passing from one life into another, to step out of the warm, living, impressionable summer day into this very sanctuary of death. There was an air of faded brutality about it all ; a sense of dull cruelty and futility, which reduced life to its meanest elements. The stupid violence depicted was like a brutal epigram on all enthusiasm.

A crushing feeling of weariness crept over her. It was one of those moments when the mind turns away, sickened, from any idea of effort or sacrifice, and old watch-words sound empty. As she sat there meditating, a bell rang sharply somewhere overhead. She counted the strokes. Four, five, six o'clock already. And Hardinge

had said that he was coming that evening to talk to her.

She would not go directly home. She had herself driven to call upon Monsieur Simon, Lexeter's old and dear friend. She found him sitting up in a large basket-chair, playing at dominoes with his nurse. His face brightened a little with the pleasure of seeing her. She told him that Lexeter was coming soon to call on him, and the old man nodded smilingly.

“*Mais oui, oui. C'est un bon cœur celui-là. Il est bien malheureux,*” he said, turning his eyes mechanically towards the place on the wall where her photograph had been accustomed to hang.

She imagined that he did not understand her. What was there to make Lexeter *malheureux*?

In lifting his hand, Monsieur Simon had knocked one or two of his dominoes off the table. He did not observe it, but when Barbara stooped to pick them up he apologised. He thanked her with all his old punctilious deference of manner. The severe lines of his face were scarcely altered ; the eyes had only grown a little dull under his heavy projecting eyebrows ; but when he spoke his voice sounded like a child's. He seemed quite contented now.

“Lord bless you, madam, the poor old gentleman was never more comfortable nor peaceful in his life,” the nurse said com-

placently, smoothing down her apron and following Barbara to the door.

She drove home in a mood of discouragement, in which it seemed as if all the tragic realities of life were conspiring together to close in around her. She felt suffocated and entrapped. To reach the house she had to pass before the Hospital of the Consolazione. Once before she had been in there, with Margherita, to see after a woman who was hurt. I think she had almost forgotten the circumstance, but, as she passed before the long silent building, it all came back upon her with a rush. She remembered the look of the ward, the sickening stillness of the place. There was one man in particular, with his arm fastened up above his head by a

pulley—she remembered it all as if it had been yesterday. That helpless swinging arm was like a symbol of all the inevitable helpless misery in the world, and, for the first time, she rebelled at the idea. After all, what one wants most in this world is happiness. We all begin by wanting it for ourselves ; most of us, at least while we are young, expect it. After a time one gives up a good deal of the expectation, but I have never yet found that this materially affected the want.

It all comes in the end to a question of unselfishness ; but the impulse towards self-sacrifice is like very many other human emotions, and subject to eclipse. And, as Hardinge observed once, there are days

when the chief result of having denied one's own wishes and suffered a great deal seems to be the extended capacity for suffering a great deal more. It was one of those days for Barbara.

Dinner was ready and waiting when she entered, but she sent it away untouched. When Margherita remonstrated she said simply: "I am not hungry. I cannot eat."

The old woman looked at her with a curiously persistent anxiety.

"It—there surely can be no bad news which the signora contessa has heard?" she asked, bending down her head and pretending to arrange the folds of her apron.

"Certainly not. I am only tired," said

Barbara, smiling faintly. She added presently: "What possible bad news could I have heard?"

"Eh, Miss Barbara, my dear," said Margherita, slipping back into the old way of speaking, "it's a hard world for everybody at times. And some days, the Lord forgive me! but I wonder if the blessed saints are growing deaf up above there? But *come si fa?* *mia cara signorina*, with time and patience the mulberry-leaf becomes silk—and very poor-wearing silk it makes, the Lord knows," she muttered, going out of the room and back into her kitchen.

Barbara had not changed her walking-dress.

It was the hottest night of that summer.

Every window and door in the great old palace stood wide open ; one could even hear voices of people talking on the stairs. She heard a clock far off striking the quarter ; she looked at her watch—it was after nine o'clock. Surely if Hardinge were coming at all he would not be much later than nine ?

There was no perceptible wind, but every now and then the room was filled with the heavy scent of orange-blossom. There was a *festa* of some kind, a saint's day, being celebrated at the small drinking-shop near the corner. To the end of her days Barbara will remember the airs that they were playing, the mechanical tinkling iteration of the dance-music that night. The convent-bell rang out another quarter. The

sound of voices on the stair suddenly grew hushed, and then broke out again much louder. There was a quick heavy step, and then a sharp peal at the bell. Barbara turned suddenly and walked over to the sofa at the farther end of the room and sat down. It was not her usual place. She sat quite still, waiting. The band went on playing its silly teasing waltz—la-la, la-la, la-la-la. And then it began all over again. One of the violins was always making a blunder on the second bar. Barbara remarked to herself quite composedly that that was always the way with those street musicians. You see they depend entirely upon playing by ear. Now that is all very well, so far as

it goes, but when you once begin making mistakes——

Somebody was speaking in whispers in the next room. And there was not another sound in the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was Margherita who came in. Barbara had always known it would be Margherita. She never moved ; she only turned her eyes towards the old woman and waited. After all she had never really expected anything else.

“ Ah *signorina, signorina mia!* ” the woman cried out pitifully. She wrung her two honest hard-working hands together, and spread them out dramatically straight

before her in a superbly simple gesture of despair.

Barbara, looking at it, reflected quickly that nearly every Italian is a born tragic actor. It is only the Latin races who have that element in their blood.

“Well?” she said. She spoke louder than she had intended, but that was only because her lips were dry.

“Ah, *signorina mia*, it is—it is the Signora Regina. Oh, the poor Signora Regina. I remember her a little child on the Pincian hill with the other children. It seems only the other day. And when she used to look at me with those great eyes of hers, and say: ‘*Please—good Margherita—*’ And such little hands; no bigger than that. And

such coaxing ways about her; who ever had the heart to refuse her anything? And now to think of her lying there as good as dead, *santissima Vergine!* as good as dead, and not even her husband with her!"

"Well?" said Barbara again.

"It is the fever, signorina, *la perniciosa*. Ah, you do not know what that is, you others. It is only the Romans who know it. It is the fever that never spares; they all die of it, some in one day, some in two; never more than two. And to think of the Signora Regina with her little baby. It was yesterday night, signora, that she started. She took nobody with her but the boy to drive the horses, and he was too young to do

anything but what he was told to do, *poveretto!* And all night long they drove across the Campagna; and when they got into town they had to lift her out of the carriage, Pietro says, and all day long she has been lying like somebody in a trance. And no one knows when the Signor Cardella is coming, ah, *pover uomo!* they say he is quite mad with jealousy about his wife. He worships the very ground she treads on. And the doctor is with her now, and the sisters. They say she will not pass the night, *povera signorina!* and, if you please signora, Pietro has come to ask for—— They have sent——”

She stopped short and looked irresolutely at her young mistress. The band at the

corner went on playing its variations : la-la, la-la, la-la-la.

“And so,” said Barbara, speaking quite calmly and in the tone of a person finishing an old story, “and so they have sent here for my husband.”

She got up, still with that air of absolute self-possession, and walked straight across the room. There was a book lying open on one of the tables. She closed it gently and pushed it back into its place.

“Will you fetch me my hat, Margherita ? And send someone downstairs to call me a carriage. I shall not take you with me on account of Miss Octave ; but —stay. Is there anybody here wait-

ing? any messenger from the Signora Regina?"

There was a shuffling of feet, and someone coughed discreetly behind the door.

"There is Pietro, the Signor Cardella's own man. But—but oh, *signora mia*, *per l'amor di Dio*, you are not going there—without knowing. The Lord forgive me! but if I had the judging of the Signor Cescio——"

"Don't," said Barbara quickly, lifting her hand.

She stood still, looking down at the floor for a moment.

"When Miss Octave comes home—don't cry, Margherita, it does no good, and I

want you to help me in this. When Miss Octave comes home you will tell her that I have been called out, suddenly, to see a sick person. And you will see that she has something to eat before she goes to bed. And if Mr. Hardinge should call this evening, you will tell him——” She lifted up her eyes and looked at Margherita. “Say that I am sorry not to have seen him,” said poor Barbara gently.

She went down the long stairs like somebody in a dream. A man walked in front of her, carrying a light. It was the same man who helped her into the low carriage.

“It is only a country trap, not fit for the city. But the Signora Cardella chose

it because it was so light for the horses. And I hope the signora contessa will excuse it. No one will see the signora, it is so dark."

Barbara thanked him, and got in mechanically. She did not hear a word of what he said. But long afterwards she remembered that the horses wore bells to their collars like Campagna horses. She was positive about this because she heard them jingle. The man too was familiar to her. It was a one-seated trap, so that she sat next to the driver; as they passed under the first gas-lamp she looked at him—she knew his face at once. She had noticed some peculiarity about it the only time she dined at the Cardellas'. She remembered that dinner perfectly, and how

Cesco had talked to her on the way home. They had been married three months then——

The servant saw that she recognised him, and touched his hat.

“The poor signora is very bad, very bad indeed,” he said gravely. “The signora contessa will be very much shocked to see her. The doctor was there when I came away.”

“Yes,” said Barbara automatically. Regina had looked so very beautiful at that dinner. She remembered speaking of it to Cesco as they came away. She remembered his laughing at her for being so enthusiastic, and saying——

The carriage stopped with a jerk at the door of the Cardellas’ palace. There was

another groom waiting here, who ran forward with a lamp. The driver looked at her as he helped her out of the carriage, and she reflected quickly that he must know all about it. Probably, for he was, after all, only a kind-hearted country lad whom the Signor Cardella had taken from the farm into his service ; probably, he was sorry for her.

She thanked him again and went upstairs.

There had only been two old servants left in the house to look after it, and both had departed. Italian servants never stay where anyone is dying. It is considered unlucky. There was no one left in charge but the grooms in the stable and the Sister of Charity, whom the doctor had brought

with him. It was an English doctor whom she knew, and his face brightened up at the sight of her.

“Indeed, I am very glad to see some responsible person. You are going in? You are not afraid of the infection? Well, I think you are quite right myself. I don’t hold with this theory of the *perniciosa* being contagious. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred you will find it brought on by imprudence, the most reckless imprudence, as with that poor lady in there. Very shocking case, very. I never saw a sadder. And not a soul to look after the place!”

“Is there no hope then? None? Is there nothing more to do for her? Nothing that——”

She paused between every question, and stopped at last; she could read the answer in his face. She sat down suddenly and buried her face in her hands.

There was a moment's silence, and then she heard the tinkling of a glass against a decanter, and some wine was held to her lips.

“My dear lady, you are overwrought. Come, come, Signora Lalli; why this is not like you. This won't do at all. Why, my dear lady, don't you know that I am always holding you up to my patients as an example of the one young woman in the world who can control her nerves?” the old doctor said encouragingly, patting her on the shoulder like a child.

She swallowed a mouthful of the wine obediently. In a moment or two she moved her hands away, and said: "I beg your pardon. I did not mean to be troublesome. But it is all so sudden. And my husband is away. Regina is his cousin—they were brought up together——" Her voice began to tremble again, but she looked up and smiled faintly at the doctor.

"Just so. Exactly. And a very fortunate thing it is for her that you have come." The servants had been as reticent in their conjectures as Italian servants are wont to be, and Doctor Vincy had not been living thirty years in Rome for nothing.

He turned his keen, steady gray

eyes upon Barbara's face for a moment. "H—m," he said, frowning until the bushy eyebrows nearly met across his forehead.

He opened a door softly. "Don't be alarmed at whatever she may say. She will not recognise you."

But when they went in there did not seem much occasion for this warning. Regina was lying on the bed with her eyes closed. Her cheeks were flushed to a dark purplish red. One round white arm was stretched out over the coverlet. It was a blue silk coverlet with a long fringe; her fingers kept plucking at the fringe.

"H—m," said the doctor, looking down at her.

He held her hand in his for a moment, and then laid it gently back upon the pillow. The fingers began contentedly plucking at the pillow.

“H—m,” said the doctor again, shaking his old head.

He went away into a corner of the room, and began talking to the nurse in a low tone. Barbara sat down in the chair by the bedside.

How long she sat there she never could tell. But perhaps it was not many minutes before the doctor came back. He no longer spoke under his breath, and there was something hopeless in the very fact that such words could be fearlessly spoken.

“You will stay here for the remainder

of the night? Or at all events until—until there is no necessity for further attendance?”

“Yes,” said Barbara just audibly.

“Ah! That is, I think, the best arrangement. It is, indeed, all we can do. I will not trouble you with any directions; the nurse knows what is to be done—the stimulant, when she can be got to take it. And this ice can be changed on her head.” He took a pair of glasses out of his pocket, and began fitting them on slowly. “I shall return about four o’clock. It is not likely that there will be any change sooner. And I shall bring Dr. Guastalla with me. It will always be satisfactory to the family—— I have taken upon myself to telegraph to Signor

Cardella. He can hardly be here before the morning train from Naples, but if he should arrive—— I fear, from what the servants say, that this poor lady left home somewhat in defiance of his wishes, and he—— In case he comes——”

“I shall be here,” said Barbara simply, laying her own cool hand protectingly upon the clutching fingers, and looking up at the doctor with a clear solemn gaze.

I have never heard old Dr. Vincy quoted as a man of imagination before or since, but it is an undoubted fact that he told his wife subsequently that the Contessa Lalli had looked at him with the face of an angel.

“Pooh, my dear,” said Mrs. Vincy promptly. She had known Barbara Floyd in the days when she wore short frocks, and she had no patience, not she! with a girl who married an Italian.

Perhaps the very strangest thing about totally exceptional events is that they seem so simple when they happen. Barbara never could recollect afterwards how long it was, but it seemed a long time that this silent vigil lasted. Once the nurse got up and went to the door. There was some whispering, and when she returned to her place she said something about sending for the priest to administer extreme unction.

“Oh, not yet!” said Barbara fervently. It seemed like giving up the last hope.

“The signora contessa is not, I imagine, of our religion?” the sister asked gravely. After that she seemed less inclined to converse. She sat quite motionless, with bent head, telling over her rosary. From time to time she rose noiselessly to freshen the cloths with vinegar. After a while she looked up quietly and said :

“If the signora has anything especial to say to the Signora Cardella she had better be ready. She is waking now ;” and even as she spoke Regina’s heavy eyelashes quivered. She sighed once or twice, and asked for water. Barbara took a glass from the nurse and held it to her lips. Her hand trembled so that great drops of the medicine fell and stained the sheet.

“Dear Regina, do you know me? I am Barbara,” she said.

Regina opened her wild mournful eyes and looked at her. At that moment, with her flushed face, and her bare arms, and her heavy hair unbound upon the pillow, she was so gloriously beautiful that even the nurse was startled.

She said: “I want Cesco.”

Barbara turned white to the very lips, but she answered at once, trying to speak slowly and clearly: “Poor Cesco is not here; he is very far away—in Venice. He will be very sorry when he knows. But if there is anything that you want to say to him, and you will tell me, I promise you that I will repeat it. You can trust me—indeed

you can trust me. I am so sorry for you——”

Her voice had grown as urgent as some inarticulate cry for help. She was only conscious of living through her own and Regina's suffering.

Regina looked at her now with a sort of apathetic wonder.

“It was a cruel letter,” she said slowly. And then, after a long pause: “Mamma would never let us meet. Sometimes I could speak to him on the stairs—the old stairs at home.—And Ugo will not let me see him.—Cesco——”

She suddenly raised herself up in the bed and stretched her arms straight out before her. The movement was so unexpected that the sister had not even time to put

her arm behind her and assist her rising. She said :

“I want Cesco. I blew the candles—out—before the Madonna—and it is—dark—on the stairs——”

“Regina—— Oh, I cannot bear it. My heart will break,” Barbara said passionately, and speaking English. She took hold of both the dying woman’s hands : “Regina, my poor girl, have you not a word to say—nothing—for your husband, for your little child ? Good God, it is impossible, impossible that she should die like this. Regina !”

There was an instant of absolute breathless silence.

“She is going off again,” the nurse said significantly, feeling the weight grow heavier

on her shoulder. She lowered her arm cautiously, and as she did so Regina looked up into her face with that resplendent wide-eyed glance of hers, and laughed. She laughed aloud, like a child, as Barbara had never heard her laugh before. In what little intercourse there had ever been between them, the Italian girl had always acted on the defensive; Barbara had seen her reticent, sneering, sulky; she had never in any way connected the idea of simple joyousness with that magnificent beauty. And now, even as they leaned over her, her eyelids drooped and a changed sharpened look came over her face. They laid her back on the pillows and waited.

The Cardellas' house was a very old palace at the corner of what is now one of the

new boulevards of modern Rome. It faced a street running directly across the city from one to the opposite gate. Towards morning, Barbara was aware of a faint, distant, continuous noise—something unclassifiable: a noise which at one moment seemed sharp and at another muffled, which swelled and decreased in volume without ever absolutely ceasing, and which was distinctly drawing nearer. When she first realised that she was hearing it, she had already been unconsciously listening to it for many minutes. It had already begun to assume a definite form, to divide itself into two clearly defined sounds, the muffled footfall of a myriad feet and the shrill incessant multitudinous cry of a crowd of animals.

“It is the sheep changing pasture,” the nurse said, laying down her rosary and listening.

It was a flock of sheep being driven from one part of the Campagna to another, and crossing the city in the dead of night. For nearly a mile the narrow street was blocked with a dim moving mass, now dark and struggling, and now nearly white, as it was lost in the shadow of the houses or emerged into the dim moonlight of the cross-streets. There were thousands upon thousands of them, herded by silent dogs and watched over by mounted shepherds, clothed in shaggy goat-skins, and armed with long lances to which their lanterns were fastened.

In a very few minutes the room was filled with the growing strident bleat of the sheep. The air grew impregnated with a wild musky smell. In a moment, out of the silent summer night, there had arisen the cry of thousands of struggling creatures. The noise which they made was like nothing describable, nothing imaginable. It did away at once with all civilisation. It was like something born of the night, something alien, inarticulate, wild, and strange beyond description.

And all this time Regina never moved.

The clamour died away slowly like the passing of the wild train of some witches' sabbath. By-and-by the doctors came again. There were two of them now. They came into the room and went out

again, and Barbara answered when they spoke to her.

After a time someone touched her on the shoulder gently. She looked up ; there was a man followed by a boy standing in the doorway, and the man was dressed like a priest. And then somebody asked Barbara to wait in the next room.

She went in, and the door was shut behind her. She went and stood by the window ; the morning sky was turning gray. Regina's bird was awakened by the glare of the paling candle ; he hopped restlessly about his cage. Presently he began to sing.

And then Dr. Vincy came in.

She half rose from her seat and looked

at him. "My dear lady," he said, coming up and taking one of her hands in his; "my dear young lady——"

"And she never spoke again? She said nothing?—nothing?" asked Barbara, with a sickening prevision of what was coming.

"Nothing," the doctor said; "she went quite quietly; she hardly suffered. There was not a chance of saving her from the very first."

Barbara had reached the utmost limit of all power of resistance. She could do nothing now but sob helplessly and let herself be taken care of as they chose. She had begged to be the first who spoke to Signor Cardella; but when they brought him to her, she could only hold out her

hands to him in helpless pity, crying out :

“I wish I could have done something for her. I wish that I could have got her to speak to me.”

It was nearly twelve o'clock before the doctor would let her be driven home. As they drew near her own house, he noticed that she began to tremble violently. He looked out of the carriage-window and saw a young man stepping rather quickly across the street. The old doctor looked at him hard for a moment.

“Ah,” he said, “I thought I recognised that youngster. There goes young Hardinge. Now I wonder what he is doing in Rome at this season?”

It was a good-natured attempt to divert

the poor young lady's melancholy thoughts. But Dr. Vincy was not astonished that she did not answer. He was accustomed to a lack of self-control in women.

CHAPTER IX.

IT was the fact of the Florence train being an hour late which had prevented Hardinge from calling on Barbara. By the time Lexeter had washed off some of his travel-stains and eaten a leisurely dinner it was too late for anything but a stroll out into the moonlight—"If you are sure that you are not too tired, old fellow?"—said Hardinge, stopping to light his cigar in the hotel-passage.

They stepped out into the street together.

“Which way?”

“Oh, Capitol,” said Lexeter, thrusting his hands into his pockets and turning down towards the Corso.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, but the street was still crowded with slowly-passing Romans. Light summery dresses flitted constantly past them. The air was full of light laughter and quick voices, and the tripping, tinkling sound of the mandoline from every little wine-shop.

“And to think that I was sitting in chambers in London three days ago,” said Lexeter, looking contentedly around him.

“Ah! town won't be very cheerful now.”

“About as cheerful as a locked-up trunk. And if you could have seen the fog the day I left. Good Lord! Well!”—they had got to the foot of the Capitoline hill, and Lexeter stopped deliberately and seated himself on one of the lower steps of the stairway—“I never feel myself thoroughly out of England until I find myself reclining picturesquely upon a public monument. And to sit without one’s hat in the public thoroughfare—well, I should not like at this moment to be called upon to define the privileges of a Briton. Go on, old boy, you were saying——”

“Oh, nothing particular. I say, Lexeter.”

“Well?”

“You haven’t half asked after your old acquaintances. By-the-way, one of them is

gone. Old Floyd—you remember him? You used to be awful pals. Well, he sailed about a fortnight ago for America.”

“Ah! and have you—have you happened to see any of the others lately?”

“I was to have called on the Contessa Lalli to-night, you know. I told you so.”

“No, you said nothing of the kind,” said Lexeter slowly.

“Ah well, I meant to. It comes very much to the same thing,” said Hardinge, beginning to whistle. He looked up at a star precisely above him. “Jolly night, this. As I was not saying, then, there is one character in history, now happily defunct, for whom I have always entertained the liveliest sympathy—and that

is the last young lady who was chained to the rock before Andromeda. I fancy her relatives and friends must have had a very slight opinion of Perseus."

Lexeter looked at the ground.

"There are moments when I am absolutely convinced that women are merely the creatures of accident."

Hardinge glanced at him quickly, remembering something which Clifford Dix had hinted.

"Not all women. There are exceptions here and there," he said rather awkwardly. He threw away the end of his cigar. "Come along to the top and have a look at old Marcus Aurelius."

The hollow square of the palace was all in shadow. As they came up the

steps, the imperial horseman and horse of bronze were merely a darker shade upon the shadowy background of the piazza. On the loggia of each façade, antique figures of Greek gods and Roman deities lifted in various attitudes of grace and dignity against the limpid moonlit sky. All else was darkness. They could not even see the fountain, they could only hear the cool sound of its falling water plashing into the wide, shallow, brimming marble basin at their feet.

Hardinge went forward a few steps: "By Jove, Lexeter, look at that!" Rising into the tepid air, against the fleecy drifting clouds of an Italian summer night, they looked up at the great statue of the emperor. It rose between them

and the moonlight, a muffled figure with outstretched arm and outspread hand coming dark and distinct against the sky. Centuries of life seemed to fall away; it was indeed the imperial hand of Marcus Aurelius, imperious but benignant, a hand to urge and restrain—a hand of command and clemency, raised, as if in solemn warning, over the merciless sleeping city, across those blood-sprinkled steps of the Capitol, at whose base life and liberty have sunk so often, unpitied and incarnadine, in the dust.

They stood looking at it in silence for a minute or two, and then Lexeter said abruptly: “Look here, Hardinge. You were speaking of Andromeda. Did you mean anything in particular? I

mean anything about Miss Floyd that was."

I don't know what possessed Hardinge. "No," he said, after a moment's deliberation. He consoled himself afterwards with reflecting that this was not altogether a falsehood. I do not understand where he saw the difference myself.

"I ask the question," Lexeter added calmly, "because of the great, the very great liking and admiration, which I have for Barbara. As you said a little while ago, I am her father's friend——" Hardinge raised his eyebrows and looked at Marcus Aurelius.

"I happen to know—I am not at liberty to tell you how—that she was particularly in love with her husband. Mr. Floyd

talked to me about it weeks before their engagement. At a picnic down at Ostia; I daresay you don't remember it. And it would distress me very much to hear that her marriage was a failure."

"My dear fellow, if I wished to be cynical—which I don't—I would answer you that every marriage in a certain sense is a failure. No woman ever marries exactly the man she fell in love with; especially not an imaginative and generous-natured girl like Miss Floyd. I've no doubt she looked upon Lalli as the embodiment of honour and courage and chivalry when she married him. I don't; but then that is a mere matter of private opinion. I don't know of anything against him, mind you. But I don't like his

style. I don't like the men he associates with. That fellow Borgia, for instance. I consider Cavaliere Borgia, dispassionately speaking, a cad. The opinion is quite dispassionate, for I don't think I've ever exchanged six words with him in my life."

He drew out his cigar-case and lighted another cigar.

"Smoke? you won't find them so bad in their way. The fact is, Lexeter, the most damning thing I know about Lalli is what I have heard you say yourself—that all his good qualities are thrust upon the public like so many advertisements. I quite agree with you there. And so does Miss Damon," he added in a lower voice.

“Ah!” said Lexeter. He took out a match and struck it. “Have you seen any English papers lately? Seen that last row at Berlin about Alsace-Lorraine?”

The next day he went out early in the afternoon, and called on the Contessa Lalli. Margherita opened the door to him, and informed him blankly that the signora did not receive.

About an hour afterwards Hardinge called on the same errand. But instead of letting himself be sent away, he asked for Miss Damon.

Miss Octave had gone out for a few moments, but if the signore cared to wait in the drawing-room——? The signore expressed his entire readiness.

He had been waiting some quarter of an hour or so in the cool flower-scented room; he had had time to walk about and look at Barbara's books, at Octave's music scattered over the piano; he was standing by the table fingering the odds and ends which filled Octave's work-basket when the door opened rather suddenly. She had come home.

"Why have you bought so many pairs of scissors since you left Sorrento, Miss Damon?"

"Oh," said Octave, putting out both hands, "I am so miserable! I am so glad that you have come!"

It was the first time that he had ever seen her in trouble. The sight

of her trembling lips was like the signal for the awaking of all the tenderness in his nature. He spoke quite abruptly.

“Will you tell me all about it? Tell me, Octave; tell me!” He took both her little gloved hands in his, and kissed them one after the other devoutly.

Octave remained quite passive. She stood looking at him for nearly a minute without speaking.

Presently he said: “Will you come and sit on the sofa? And may I take off your hat? Will you let me touch your beautiful hair? My dear, my love! I don’t know how to say it to you. Words are not good enough. I should like to

kneel down before you. I love you. I worship you. May I tell you how I love you, Octave?"

She laid her two hands softly together, and turned her face towards him. They sat in this way looking at each other for another minute or two, and then Hardinge moved and put his strong arm gently about her.

"I should like to be allowed to devote all the rest of my life to you. I should like to spend my life in making you happy. My dear, will you let me try if I can do it?"

"Yes," said Octave, dropping her eyes gravely and sighing.

He put his hand gently against her

cheek, and lifted up her face towards him. He hesitated for an instant, and then bent down and kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER X.

It was some time before Hardinge thought of saying: "You were in trouble when you came in, and you have not told me why. May I not be allowed to help you?"

"It was about poor Baby. Oh, I had forgotten her. She was asleep when I went out. I will go and see if she is awake now."

"And you will come back soon? Other-

wise I shall not let you go," said Hardinge playfully.

She came back in the course of two or three minutes.

"She is asleep. I did not awake her; I only opened the door and looked in." She had not heard yet of Regina's death; she only knew that Barbara had been sitting up with her; she began telling Hardinge about it. "Poor Barbara! she is so good—I don't think there is anybody better than Barbara. And yet she is always making mistakes. Walter?"

"Yes, dear."

"I wonder if I ought to tell you something?"

"Yes; tell me," said Hardinge, taking up her hand and kissing it.

“It is a secret, you know. Nobody knows of it but you. But—but Cesco Lalli asked me to marry him once; ages ago.”

“He did, did he? By Jove, I——”

“Hush. I told you you were not to be angry. And I did not want to marry an Italian,” said Octave softly. “It was different with Barbara. She always had ideas. Poor Barbara!”

Everywhere about the room there were flat dishes filled with large white roses. Octave’s gown was the only other light spot in the semi-darkness. Far down the hot street they could hear the strident cry of some fruit-seller. “I should like,” said Octave, “to tell no one before I see mamma about — this.” She rested her smooth

cheek contentedly against his shoulder. "And now that Barbara looks so unhappy—I don't think—I am afraid Count Lalli is not very kind to her. And it would seem so unkind to tell her just now about—us."

"Then you shall tell her when you like," said Hardinge. What would he not have promised at that moment? She was so sweet, so shy, so precious; he hardly dared do more than look at her. He touched her reverently, with an exquisite yearning pang of tenderness as one would touch a flower. This keen-eyed, determined, and rather careless young man found himself suddenly transported into an entirely new world of sensations. A fortnight ago he might have spoken perhaps of Octave

as of a charming and pretty girl. She was his queen now, set above all meaner praise than that of silent and impassioned service.

For all these hours Barbara had been lying on the sofa in her dressing-room. She was not asleep, as Octave had imagined. The first horror of shrinking from the implacable clutch of this anguish was over. She gazed now at her sorrow in the face; she recognised it as a companion. When Octave opened the door and looked in, she had reached a stage of passive exhaustion. The first cruel force of her indignation — her outraged pride — was spent. She could think almost calmly now of meeting her husband. She was beginning to pity him rather than herself.

After a long while she heard a bell ring sharply ; the sound aroused her. She sat up and pushed back her loosened hair. A moment later she heard Octave's step in the passage, and she sank back among her pillows ; she was not ready to see anyone yet. But the thought of Octave came to her like a living touch. Dear little Octave, poor child ; knowing nothing as yet of the cruel branding experiences of life ;—from the depths of her own grief Barbara felt like stretching tender protecting arms about her. She began little by little to merge her own sorrow in a growing sense of human fellowship. She saw again vividly before her the expression of blank despair on Ugo Cardella's austere countenance ; and she reproached

herself with not having done more for him. She lay quite motionless, with her pale cheek resting on her hand, and her clear mournful gaze fixed upon the opposite wall ; but what she was really seeing was a continually increasing multitude of claims and duties—all the sorrow of the world stretched out helpless hands towards her. It was an hour of solemn initiation ; one of those impassioned moods whose duration is measured by moments of intolerable enthusiasm, leaving landmarks for a whole life's direction. It was one of those experiences which make us strong and which make us dumb. High tides or an earthquake are not continuous manifestations, and yet there is more evidence of their passage on the land than of all

the smiling fruitful years. Duty — fatal implacable tyrant! nobler than emperor, more insatiable than Cæsar—let those who know what it is to stand beside the grave wherein lies buried all thought of personal good and joy; let those who have renounced—the world's nameless martyrs, looking forward to no resurrection dawn—let those about to live salute thee.

She rose, steadying herself by the back of a chair, for she was chilled with exhaustion and giddy with lack of food. She rose and walked languidly over to the window and pushed open the blind. It seemed to her that days had passed since she entered that room, and it was yet afternoon. The joyous blue-and-white sky was still full of

sunshine and light. It was like going back into life. The first sickening sense of isolation in her sorrow was past. She began languidly to re-arrange her hair; presently she rang for her maid to come and help her. She would go out and speak to Octave now; she would send for Hardinge. They would be ready to accept what she told them. And Regina's name was safe. And it was a great deal to have the friendship of those two—she thought of each of them apart. Mrs. Van Ness's words remained like nothing more than an uneasy memory. It was impossible—when she had nothing else to love in the world—impossible that anything could occur to widen the distance which must for ever remain between herself and Hardinge. She

knew perfectly well now that she loved him, and there was a mournful delight and pride in the thought that she cared above all for what was highest in him, with a love that could only be intensified by time and privation. And courage was easier when she thought of this. She was ready to renounce all the desires, all the exigencies of love, so that she might still go on loving him. She did not expect personal happiness; she only clung to the belief that he would not change as everything else had changed about her. And even this seemed much. For she herself was changed. She was as one who has looked for some ineffacable instant upon the head of the Medusa, who has seen and touched the darker possibilities of life—to

whom for ever after the spring fields and the untroubled laugh of children shall come fraught with a sense of passionate significance and loss.

Book III.

' ANAKH.

"It is hard to lose the dream of a life; and when that dream has drawn all its lustre from virtue, when joy has been conceived only in the loving service of the noblest being, the highest ideal we know, then if a man sees his ideal crushed before his eyes, and feels that honour itself has turned against him, and that because he has disdained base things he has lost all—then shall it be known if his virtue is a derivative and conquerable thing, or has in it an inbred energy that is incapable of despair. If he can raise his head to fight anew, he will find all fighting easy now. The worst has come to the worst; henceforth can no man trouble him; he bears in his spirit the tidemark of its highest woe."

FREDERIC MYERS.

CHAPTER I.

ONE October afternoon we were sitting in the inner porch of the church of San Marco at Venice, and we were talking. To us presently appeared a small party of three : husband, wife, and unmistakable courier.

“Fellow-Britons abroad,” observed my companion resignedly ; and we sighed and looked.

They stepped out of the sunshine into

the shadow of the atrium, and the lady opened her hand-bag and produced a book.

“We need not go in; we have seen this place already, my dear,” she remarked triumphantly after consulting some entry.

“Do you think so, my love? It looks very pretty. But I have no recollection of it really,” said her husband very mildly, gazing about him with a polite and deprecatory air.

“I am sure of it. Because it is crossed out in my book,” his wife continued, shutting up her bag with an emphatic snap, and forthwith they departed, followed by an impassive courier, and I trust spent the remainder of that autumn afternoon

profitably in the purchase of many glass beads.

And then we went out and sat down at the foot of the loggia of Sansovino, and gazed at our beloved church. It rose before us like a thing of the dawn and of the sunset; strange, fantastic, beautiful. From the dawn had come its colour and from the night its mystery. Like the gorgeous fabric of a dream we saw it; lustrous with the glitter of gold; rich with slabs of veined and coloured marble and curious Byzantine sculptures; sheeny like a dove's neck; delicate and lovely in tone like a shell; low-domed, column upon column, florid arch upon florid arch; pale and gleaming and splendid with the spoils of centuries of conquest. Set

above the Adriatic tides which come and lave its marble slabs and lapse away sighing to the sea, St. Mark's Church, sea-washed, sea-worn, a thing of the sea and sky, is for ever touched and transfigured by the changes of both, gleaming under the one, and reflected in the shallow pools of the other—pools which fill its very porches in the high tides of early spring and autumn.

As we sat watching all this we saw a beautiful and intelligent collic-dog, who had been lying patiently for some time past with his nose between his paws and his wistful eyes fixed upon the church-door, spring to his feet and make a rush at a man crossing the piazza.

“Hallo, Prince!” we heard the man

say; “why, what are you doing here? Where is your master, sir?”

The dog whined and barked and fawned in the shape of a comma about the man’s legs.

“I know that man,” observed Lawrence, “his name is Lexeter. He writes for the —— Review. He is a capital fellow. If he comes over here I’ll introduce him to you.”

But Lexeter did not come toward us; he turned into the church. He was evidently looking for someone, and presently he caught sight of her in the person of a tall, rather sad-faced girl who was seated on the marble bench at the foot of one of the pillars. There were only a few people left in church;

the organ was playing for the benediction. She appeared to be listening to the music; her lips were slightly parted; she was looking at the blue-robed angel of the mosaic overhead, and there was something in her action and expression, and in the way the light fell upon her upturned face, which recalled the face of Titian's Madonna in the great Assumption picture at the Belle Arti.

She did not observe Lexeter until he was very near her, and then it was beautiful to see how her whole look changed. She turned to him gladly, holding out her hand with a full cordial smile.

"You have come back? I am so pleased. We did not expect you back until to-morrow."

“Oh, Rimini was hot,” said Lexeter, “and it became a personal question between myself and the landlord whether I should be driven up to inspect the Republic of San Martino. It was quite useless my assuring him that I object to all republics. And then I thought I would come and see Hardinge off.”

“He goes to-night,” said Barbara.

“He is not coming back again to Italy?”

“No.”

The organist began playing the Ave Verum of Pergolese. The red sunlight stole higher up the golden dome; it touched the angel’s folded hands.

“Do you remember what Thackeray says somewhere, I think it is in one of

his 'Roundabout Papers,' about success?" asked Lexeter abruptly. "He says there is something which justifies itself, something godlike, in all success. Well, I am beginning to believe the contrary, or rather——"

He hesitated.

Barbara turned and looked at him.

"I believe," said Lexeter, "that to accept failure nobly is to surpass success."

She was silent for a moment.

"Why do you say this to me, Mr. Lexeter?"

Her voice had a way of changing; when she spoke impulsively it had at times the clear colourless ring of a child's voice.

"Oh," said Lexeter almost harshly,

“who does not end by accepting less than he asked for? We begin by claiming happiness, we end by being thankful when we are not hurt. And people call that experience. There is a man here—Denis Lawrence, I saw him a moment ago on the Piazza—who used to have a favourite saying: *On naît demi-dieu et l'on meurt épicier.*”

“But don’t you think—don’t you really think it is something to have recognised and wanted the best?” said Barbara.

“Ah,” said Lexeter. He got up and stood before her; he was not looking at her, he was looking past her and overhead at the great golden and blue-and-white angel. “It seems odd, does it not, that all our particular Roman set of a year ago

should be so scattered? There is yourself married, and Clifford Dix gone to America, and—and Hardinge——”

The organ stopped playing with a sort of jerk. It is very much out of tune; all the church organs want tuning in Italy.

“Do you know how soon Hardinge is going to marry Miss Damon?” Lexeter asked.

He went on without giving her time to answer: “Generally one does not mind much about a man’s marriage. But one can never help taking a peculiar interest in what concerns Walter. I never liked any other man half so well. And I really believe he is doing the best thing for himself possible—now. Under all that easy

way of his he has a very devoted nature. If he had fallen in love with—with any woman he could not marry, it would have gone very hard with Walter. Some men—oh, some men,” said poor Lexeter, “are made to bear that sort of thing. At least, they have to take life pretty much as it comes to them. But Walter——”

Years after Barbara remembered the action of his hands as he was speaking. He was standing in front of her, and his hands were gripped together so that each vein and muscle stood out under the skin. It was like the wordless confession of some supreme struggle. Barbara thought it was because he was so kind and so sorry for her. Perhaps it was.

She stood up now and looked at him

full in the face. "Listen!" she said. "I did not know this before. You were right in thinking that I did not know it, and I am glad that you have told me. I want you to remember this always. I was glad—I will be glad of all the happiness that comes to Walter and—and Octave. We shall miss him, you know—but—— However dear people may become, one must be glad when they find their own happiness—even away from us.

She was speaking under the force of an emotion which made her forget everything but what she was saying. Lexeter had ceased to be a man and a comparative stranger; he had lost all individuality; she was speaking to him as from one

human soul to another. And he felt this perfectly.

“God bless you, Barbara!” he said. He took her hand in his. “If I do not see you again I want you to remember this—that I did not believe very much in women when I first knew you; but you have taught me to think of all women better for your sake. I don’t suppose it makes very much difference to you what I think,” said poor Lexeter; “but perhaps some time you will be glad to remember that I said this. And—and——” He looked at her hand which he held, and then at her face, and then up at the splendid winged angel against the gold mosaic. Afterwards he thought, with a

pang of regret, that he might have kissed her hand and that he did not do it.

“And so—God bless you, my dear!”
he said.

That was how they parted.

CHAPTER II.

THERE was a new piece being given at the Opera that night, and the Lallis had a box. Hardinge had promised to come in and say good-bye to them there; he was leaving with the Trieste boat at eleven o'clock. He joined them rather late; the first act was nearly over. He carried some flowers in his hand—for Barbara.

There was some little talk about the

new music when he first came in, and then Lalli said :

“ But you are really going this evening, Signor Hardinge ? ”

“ Naturally,” said Hardinge, looking at him with some surprise. He was struck by the peculiar expression of Cesco’s countenance.

“ And you will not return again ? We shall not have the pleasure of welcoming you back again to *la nostra bella Italia* ? You really abandon us ? You leave us desolate ? ” Cesco persisted.

“ Oh, as for being desolate—— But I really wish that I could persuade you to come for a little while to Vienna. Why should you not ? The journey is nothing, and you like travelling,” he said, looking

at Barbara. He added in a lower voice :
 “You know the Damons will be there.
 It is unkind of you not to come when
 we all want you. Why will you not try
 it—just for a little while?”

“Oh hush, please! You know you
 must not talk now. You must listen
 to the music,” said Barbara, smiling
 faintly and turning her face to the
 stage.

But the picture which his words had
 conjured up was too much for her. All
 the time that the tenor was singing his
 great aria her lips and cheeks were grow-
 ing whiter. When the song was ended
 she rose while the theatre was still ringing
 with applause.

“You are ill?” asked Hardinge, looking

and starting to his feet. "Do sit down again. Let me go and fetch you something."

"The best thing for her would be to go home," said Lalli, speaking at the same moment. "And fortunately I told the gondolier to wait at the door. I will go and see if he is there."

He took up his hat and went out into the corridor.

"I do so wish you would let me get you something?—do something for you?" Hardinge persisted, looking at her anxiously. "At least, may I not put your cloak about you?"

He wrapped the white fur-lined thing gently about her shoulders, and she looked up at him and smiled without speaking.

She would have liked to die at that moment.

And then the door opened and Cesco came in again.

“All right, Barbara. You can come down when you are ready. Gently now. Hardinge, will you give my wife your arm? You will be quite well as soon as you get into the open air. It is nothing. It is only a little faintness.”

He led the way down the stairs to the gondola—the music had begun again, and there was another burst of applause—and handed her in.

“Hardinge will see you home,” he said.

He gave an order to the men, and the boat pushed off.

It was an absolutely black night. The water glittered like ink ; the light of the lamps seemed to slip over its surface as over something hard and polished. The wind was blowing up for the beginning of the equinoctial storm ; the boat could hardly make headway against the roughness of the smaller canals. The troubled water beat heavily against her bows, every bit of woodwork creaked and strained as the wind seized hold of the *felse*. There was not another boat to be seen moving across the lagoon. And all about them, from far and near the air was filled with the lonely cry of the wild sea-birds blown in by the storm. The cries came all from overhead, from the house-tops.

“Curlews,” said Hardinge to himself under his breath.

The Lallis had rooms on the Riva de' Schiavoni. They crossed a bit of the open lagoon, keeping close to the edge of the shipping. The fishing-boats moored to the riva were knocking against one another. They passed close under the bows of a small steamer riding uneasily at anchor. It was the Trieste boat, getting up steam.

Barbara had not moved or spoken since they started. She sat leaning back in the corner, so that her face was in deep shadow. The light shone in at the window on her hands and on the flowers she held.

“This is rough work for you. You are not frightened? But it seems more

dangerous than it really is. It almost needs a miracle to upset one of these flat-bottomed boats," Hardinge said once.

She shook her head. She was not frightened.

The wind seized hold of her light dress and blew it tightly about her as she stepped out of the boat on the landing.

"May I come upstairs with you," Hardinge asked; "I have three-quarters of an hour still before my boat leaves, and I should like to come in and say good-bye to you if I may."

They went into the room together, and Barbara walked over to the table and turned up the lamp. She sat down with her cloak still falling in straight white

folds about her: she had taken a seat near the window.

Hardinge came and stood beside her.

“There is nothing I hate so much as saying good-bye to people. And we have been such friends. You have been so awfully kind to me. I shall always think of you when I remember Rome. You are mixed up with the very happiest part of my life,” he said, looking at her with his boyish smile while all his face flushed and softened. It seemed very hard that Octave would not allow him to speak.

“Yes. We shall always remember each other,” said Barbara, in her clear tender tones. Her voice shook just perceptibly. She was the first to notice it, and she rose instantly and crossed over to a writing-

table which stood against the wall. She opened one of its drawers and took out a jewel-case. "I want you to do something for me," she said, turning and walking back towards him with this box in her hand. "You must not be angry with me for knowing. I want you to give this for me to Octave. Tell her that it was my mother's, and say I sent it to her with my dear love."

Hardinge had risen too. "Will you let me tell you how glad I am you know this? I have always felt that I was missing something in missing your sympathy with our happiness."

"And you are *very* happy?"

"*Very* happy," said Hardinge gravely. And then his face broke up into a smile

as he added: "But that is always your way. You demoralise one. You make me talk about myself until it needs all the accumulated experience of years to convince me that I am not the most conceited fellow living. And see! you are doing it now, and yet there are a hundred things I want to ask you about yourself—what you are going to do, and all that. I wish you would tell me. You will write—you will write to Octave of course. But there is so much one does not say in letters."

"Oh, how can I tell what I shall do?" said Barbara, walking up to the window and looking out at the night. There were lanterns moving about now, and people coming and going by the gangway of the Trieste steamer. She was conscious

of the cold touch of the glass and of the black and stormy night all the time, and yet it seemed as if every nerve in her body were strained with the effort to keep back any word which might grieve him. Never in any way to have hurt the creature we supremely love—after all that is something.

But her voice must have been less under her control than she imagined, for Hardinge looked at her doubtfully.

“Do you know, it is not like you to reject anyone’s interest, even when it is stupidly expressed interest,” he began. And then the door opened quietly and Cesco Lalli entered.

He looked from his wife to her guest.

“I am glad to see you so much better,

my dear. It was really hardly worth while, it was a pity to make our friend Hardinge lose all the music for such a—temporary—indisposition.”

“I was very much obliged to the con-
tessa for letting me come home with her,”
said Hardinge, promptly taking his hat from
the table. He looked about the room and
his eye fell upon his own bunch of flowers.
“May I have one of those roses, for
Octave?” he asked, looking at her and
speaking English. And then he put out
his hand. “I will say *au revoir* to you;
I will not say good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” said Barbara, putting out
her hand also.

And then a moment later the door closed
and he was gone.

Lalli was sitting on the sofa, with his hat still on his head. The table was in front of him, and a round lamp with a shade. Barbara looked away from him. There were more boats crowding about the Trieste steamer, the light from the lanterns shining on the glistening steel prows, and making little broken tracks of gold across the black heaving water. The steam began to pour out of the funnel more quickly, in short, angry, white puffs.

Cesco sat and watched his wife for several moments in absolute silence. The dull stupid look which crept over his face when he was angry began to make itself manifest. He breathed quickly. They made a curious picture those two, a curious

contrast; and there was something in the very immobility of her attitude which urged him to violent speech and action. He got up on his feet at last, moved by an uncontrollable fit of passion. He went and put his arm on the mantelpiece and looked at her.

“When you have *quite* finished watching the departure of your lover, perhaps you may find time to listen to what I have to say,” he began.

Barbara gave a slight, almost imperceptible start. It was as if a stab had entered into her soul. She could feel the hurt, but the pain had not yet had time to make itself fully felt. She was only conscious of a sudden sickness at heart; it was more benumbing surprise than actual

grief. But he had gone on without giving her time to answer.

“I will not be made a fool of in this fashion. If you think to deceive me—I tell you I will not be made a fool of;” he stumbled over his words, and his voice went off into falsetto. “I tell you that man shall never enter my house again. Damn him!—with his English voice and his manner, as if there were not three people in the world fit to be spoken to. I forbid you to speak to him. Do you hear me, Barbara?—I forbid you. Or to that other fine friend of his, Mr. Lexeter. By —— I will be master in my own house. Do you hear me, Barbara?”

“I hear,” said Barbara wearily, looking down at her own hands.

And then there was a horrible silence between them—a cruel blighting silence, in which all the murdered memories of the love, the tenderness, the confidence there had been between these two people rose from their graves to look with sad reproachful eyes at Barbara’s bruised and outraged heart. All the effort, all the belief of her life, went into that one minute which followed. She rose and stood facing her husband, with her hands clasped, hanging straight down before her, and her face upraised.

“Cesco——”

He was still standing with his back against the mantelpiece.

“*Non è vero.* It is not true ; I do not believe you. You dare not deny that that man—that Hardinge is your lover ?”

“I deny it absolutely. And it is impossible that you should not believe me, Cescio.”

“I do not believe you. You know that you love him. Do you think I am blind ? Have I not seen the look in your face since the day he came here ? You *dare* not say that you do not love him !”

“No,” said Barbara ; “I do love him—very very dearly.” She did not change her attitude, and her voice never trembled. “He does not care for me, Cescio. And he is going to marry Miss Damon. He

has never said a word to me, never once, that all the world might not hear. I think he *could not* do a base thing; it is not in him." She spoke with a mournful sincerity, like some young martyr reciting a creed.

"And you—you have told him—this—I suppose?" asked Lalli, almost in a whisper. He removed his arm slowly from the mantelpiece, and took a step towards her. His face was absolutely livid. He had reached a point of passion in which all control over himself was lost. He was only conscious of the wild-beast instinct of tearing to pieces whatever opposed him. Barbara looked into his face and trembled. His eyes had a dull, restless look, as if they saw nothing

clearly, and he moved them from side to side.

He repeated his question.

“And you have told him this, I suppose?”

“No,” said Barbara faintly, and putting out her hand by sheer force of instinct.

He came a step or two nearer, as if he had not heard her speak. And then all at once his face changed. For him the crisis was past. He felt that this other man had never had the luxury of considering him ridiculous; he had never at any time been pitied by Hardinge. He threw himself down on a chair by the table and covered his face with his hands. In this bewildering reaction of

feeling he felt faint with exhaustion. He began to sob like a girl.

Presently he was aware that his wife was speaking.

“Perhaps you do not believe it; you do not realise it yet, but some time, I am very sure, you will be sorry for these things that you have said to me. And I am very sorry for you that you have said them. It is cruel”—her voice faltered a little, but she steadied it and went on—“it is a cruel memory for both of us. It is miserable. I do not want to be unjust to you, God knows I do not want to be unjust, but—— See, Cescio; once, a long long time ago, at Ostia, you asked me to marry you, and, because I did not care for you then, and I told you

so, you asked me to be to you like your friend and your sister. And I believed in you. I meant what I promised. Well, you know how that ended. I think," said Barbara, with inexpressible mournfulness, "I think there is nothing in which you have not changed. And—and since our marriage——"

She was silent. The hoarse puff of the steamer grew more continuous; they could both hear it distinctly now.

"Oh," said Barbara passionately, "I meant to have been of so much use to you. I thought that you were unhappy, that you needed me. And oh, it is all so difficult to understand! I have tried so hard—so hard to do what is best for others. And now——"

She turned to the window, and pressed her forehead against the cool glass. The lights had moved away. The Trieste steamer was gone.

CHAPTER III.

SOME of these things Lexeter remembered. Some had been told to him. Others he only guessed at dimly, drawing his conclusions from what he knew of Barbara's character and history.

He lingered on the Pincian Hill that night, long after every other promenader had departed. He stayed until the policeman in charge stepped up to him, civilly enough, and touched his hat and inti-

mated that it was time the gates were closed.

And even then he could not make up his mind to go to his hotel. The very idea of *table d'hôte* was repugnant. He went and dined by himself at the corner table of a little *trattoria* somewhere near St. Peter's. It was a small cheap place, much frequented by artists, and with some reputation for its wine. He had dined there once or twice in the old days with Hardinge. There was still the same stout comely Roman matron behind the little counter. Nine years had hardly done more than add another fold or two to her ample chin. But the man who waited upon him was a new man. And perhaps his palate had grown more dainty in the interval: the

wine had lost something of the old flavour.

“*Eh! cosa vuole, signore?* We are not immortal. And it is true the taxes grow heavier every summer,” the padrona said, shrugging her round comfortable shoulders philosophically, and running the knitting-needle she held through her hair. It was an old gesture, which Lexeter remembered. He laughed, and walked out of the shop into the street.

To St. Peter's. At this hour the great square in front of the church was quite deserted. He walked all the way up under one of the colonnades, and then turned back and went and sat down at the foot of the small obelisk between the fountains. He sat down and thought. In these nine years

Lexeter's own position had altered very much for the better. He had worked hard. He had made a certain reputation for himself; what he wrote was held to be worth accepting, or at least worth refuting. It was the sort of success which he valued; he had no reason to be dissatisfied. And yet, at his age, the sight of a girl's face had had the power to make all the rest of his life seem valueless; the sound of a girl's voice, the touch of her hand, the smell of the flowers she wore, were potent enough to make all this hard-won success seem a mere makeshift, the simulacra of what he had wanted—and missed.

Lexeter was not what is commonly called a religious man. Indeed I think it was he who first described Positivism as the only

religion without perquisites. His creed was that creed of brave souls who have sought refuge from pain neither in the bitter drugs of scepticism nor in the gentle anodynes of Christianity. He was a Positivist; but he was above all a man of sentiment; a mind open to all fine issues. As he sat there on that calm spring night, hearing, as in a dream, the soft splash of the fountains, looking up once more at the limpid sombre blue of the Italian sky, he felt more intensely than ever before how much of all that is best in us can be summed up by one word—renunciation.

He thought of Barbara. He saw her sweet face rising out of the darkness, the one face in the world which he loved, a face “ennobled by a vast regret.” He

thought of her as of one of those who “dared beyond their strength, and hazarded against their judgment, and in extremities were of an excellent faith;” their only reward an ardent belief, a passionate hope, that the sum total of existing good may be greater for all bravely-borne anguish, for generous effort, for patience, for self-sacrifice, for all austere devotion, to great and unattainable ends.

And then again he thought of the life she must be leading. Many of us are called to self-denial, there is nothing new surely in the fact. But upon this girl while she was very young had fallen the necessity of foregoing love. He thought with passionate tenderness of all that life might have been made to her. It was

worse than useless, but the thought clung to him persistently. He thought of what her daily life must be in that lonely Italian villa, with a child for her companion, looking after the lives of a handful of rude peasants, because—the remembrance flashed across him suddenly—that had been one of Hardinge's dearest theories in the old days, that education of the lower class.

I think myself that he was unconsciously exaggerating the bareness of her existence. Because, after all, in all work honestly done there is to a certain degree satisfaction; because there are good moments in every life, however joyless; moments when the sun shines and winds are warm, and there is solemn meaning in the great marshalling

of the clouds ; moments when the soul of the world, the presence of the great Mother Earth is with us, bringing deep comfort and rest from pain. And Time is inexorable. There is no cry of agony in the world that with time does not grow first hoarse and then dumb. Lexeter too was aware of this growing numbness.

It was late, very late, when he returned to his hotel. The house was all shut up ; there was only one light left burning in the hall, and one of the under-porters sitting up for him—a sleepy lad, who came blinking up the stair after him to see that he had the key of his room. Lexeter was apt to be rather imperative in his manner to servants, but he spoke kindly enough to this boy. He caught sight of their two faces,

this curly-haired lad's and his own, in the glass which hung over the chimney-piece, and he laughed; it was rather grim laughter.

“And *that* is the face of a man who can spend a whole night sitting sighing at the moon like a—like a—— Oh well, you know, if this is the sort of thing one is coming to——” He blew out his candle savagely, and tried to sleep. It was quite useless. The odour of those violets haunted him; their clinging perfume seemed full of uncertain promises; there was all the intoxication in it and all the sadness of youth.

Towards morning he fell into a troubled sleep. He woke late. There was a particular call he wished to make before leaving

Rome, or else he used this intention as an excuse to himself for remaining a day longer. It was hard to decide what was his principal reason for staying. He seemed to have nothing very important to do. In the morning he read several of the English papers. He went out for a long walk, in the course of which it occurred to him to go and have a look at some frescoes recently finished in the Church of San Lorenzo. He remembered having seen a mention of the painter's name, and it was a name he knew.

There was an old man raking away the dead leaves and rubbish from one of the cemetery walks as he left the church, and for some reason Lexeter stopped and began talking to him.

“Ay, it is a fine place of its kind,” the old fellow said, straightening his back and glancing with some complacency around him. “Take a deal of keeping in order, do graves. Most people think o’ them as quiet enough places ; but, lor’ bless you, sir, garden plots is nothing in comparison. And so particular as some of the people is. Not but what that doesn’t generally wear off in a year or so. We drops tea-roses and takes to monthlies after the first year as a rule.” He took up his rake again and moved off a few steps. “Not as they’re all alike, even in that. Some o’ them Italians shows much the same feelin’ like as if they were born and bred in old England. There’s one gentleman as comes occasionally to

look after that stone, for instance" (he pointed out the place with his rake); "you wouldn't believe how that gentleman do look after it. And it must have been here a good while. It was put up before *my* time, I know, and that's going on for nine years now. He's a quiet-looking gentleman too. You wouldn't give him credit for so much feeling, to look at him."

Lexeter glanced in the direction indicated. It gave him a curious feeling to see a name he was familiar with. So this was where they had buried Regina Cardella, little Guido's mother? He remembered her glorious beauty. There was a little bird perching on the edge of the headstone, who flew away at his approach. He read the

date ; she would have been thirty now if she had lived, the same age as Barbara. He looked down at her grave with the strangest feeling of compassion. He knew very little about her except that she was resplendently beautiful, and that Barbara had been with her the night she died. Probably, he reflected, she had had no particular history. They were utter strangers, and yet he felt sorry for her. It was a pity to have lost that much beauty out of the world.

The call he wished to make was on two old ladies, on Miss Maclean and her sister, Miss Janet.

It was the same servant who opened the door to his ring. Lexeter would have been disappointed to have found the servant

changed. But here at least nothing was altered. As he entered the warm close little drawing-room the last nine years seemed to melt away like a dream. There before him was the same small fire burning noiselessly and discreetly under its ashes ; the sunlight fell in the old way on the same neat rows of flower-pots in the window, the same old circle of precious miniatures on the wall. The two white-haired old ladies were sitting one on either side of the fire, dozing peacefully through the quiet afternoon.

Of the two, Miss Janet, received him with the most cordiality. Miss Elizabeth looked upon Lexeter as no longer young enough to be attractive. She wondered somewhat at Barbara's taste in selecting this middle-

aged man for a friend—and she too with a fine young husband like Count Lalli! But even Miss Janet could not conceal some slight surprise at the unexpectedness of his visit; Lexeter himself began to feel embarrassed.

And yet he felt no impulse to go. The old charm of this place, the charm of peace and long continuance was upon him. He looked with a pleased amused tenderness at all the small, old, carefully-kept ornaments about the room. He listened to Miss Elizabeth's sweet, thin, gracious, old voice; he looked at the sunlight falling upon her shining white hair, upon her soft old hands, peacefully folded, upon the stiff formal folds of her gown. The

proud old head was a little more bent, the hands more tremulous.

“There are not many people that my sister would play for now,” Miss Janet said, looking at the little piano; “but there is no one plays music like my sister Elizabeth.”

They had shown him all their little treasures: their father’s miniature, the glove of Mary Stuart, the portrait of Miss Maclean attired for her first ball. It was Miss Janet who showed these things and gave the explanations, while Miss Elizabeth looked on with dignified interest and made conversation for their guest.

He asked her to play for him “in memory of old times,” and she consented graciously.

“We don’t often make use of the balcony now, but if you would like to step out on it, Mr. Lexeter?” Miss Janet added briskly: “Barbara—the Contessa Lalli I would be saying—was always of the opinion that one heard my sister’s music better from the balcony.”

The door was rusty now ; it grated on its disused hinges.

Lexeter stepped out on the narrow balcony. He saw the well-remembered view—the river, the bridges, the cypresses ; St. Peter’s, and the pines of the Pamphili hill. It was a gray tepid afternoon. He was tired. He leaned against the railing, listening vaguely to the thin and melancholy tone of the old piano—some of

the notes were dumb, some of the strings broken ; it seemed as if the poor old instrument was protesting against being disturbed. And all about him the divine unrest of the spring was in the air. He looked at the same sky and the same blue line of mountains ; there was nothing changed here—nothing changed but himself. For Lexeter had lost his youth. He thought of Barbara still, but he thought of her as a man thinks of some dear and distant memory. Life had stepped in between them. And after all, he asked himself—and the feeble worn-out notes of the old piano seemed to make a sort of tinkling refrain to the question—after all, was this not the better part, to accept without murmuring

what seemed like the failure of her purpose? Failure in life is to have no ideal. Barbara had never lost hers.

He went into the room again, closing the creaking door gently behind him.

Miss Elizabeth had left the piano now; she was sitting with folded hands beside the fire.

She looked up with a start as he entered. She had almost forgotten his presence there.

“And are you going the day, Mr. Lexeter? and are you not coming back?” she asked gently.

“No,” said Lexeter, taking her soft old hand in his, “I am not coming back again.”

He looked behind him as he passed through the doorway; it was his last memory of Rome—a memory of old age, of faithfulness, of resignation—a memory of peace.

THE END.

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